

THE “IMPROPERLY EDUCATED” WOMAN IN BRITISH NOVELS, 1790-1801

A Dissertation

by

LACIE ADELL OSBOURNE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2012

Major Subject: English

“The ‘Improperly Educated’ Woman in British Novels, 1790-1801.”

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## ABSTRACT

The ‘Improperly Educated’ Woman in British Novels, 1790-1801. (August 2012)

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Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Robert Griffin

This dissertation identifies the character type of the “improperly educated” woman, who is both rationally educated and passionately outspoken, and examines the delineation of this recurring figure, in relation to the female education continuum, within the evolving discourse on female learning during the period of 1790-1801. British women writers, who opposed the deficient education offered to females, contributed their voices to collectively challenging the notion that education deprived the female sex of their femininity. Consequently, women novelists exploited the “improperly educated” female character as a means to explore alternatives to the existing curriculum, specifically rational and classical knowledge and to consider the negative effects of restrictive gender identities on female education. I employ feminist literary history and criticism to evaluate the participation of Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Hays, and Maria Edgeworth in this continuing educational debate through their advocacy for restructuring of the educational system and their effective use of versions of the “improperly educated” woman to portray women as intellectually capable.

Challenging the conception of “feminine” as a natural state, Inchbald, Hays, and Edgeworth used fictional narratives to show the difficulties of strict adherence to proper

femininity and to portray the irony of an education that does not enlighten but rather restricts and censors. Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, and Edgeworth's *Belinda* respectively demonstrate the important role played by this character type in regards to eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women writers' efforts to promote improvements in female instruction, encourage female autonomy, and demonstrate women's capabilities for self-improvement. Undeterred by traditional custom, women novelists renewed literary efforts to display similarities between women of diverse social classes and levels of learning, thus exposing the adverse consequences of the conventionally transitory and inferior education, which the majority of the female sex experienced. This character makes a significant impact in promoting improvement in the educational system and revising the definition of proper feminine behavior within British society.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Donnie and Tammie Osbourne, who instilled into me the desire for learning and encouraged me to pursue my dreams.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Furthermore, I want to thank my parents for their love, prayers, unwavering emotional support, and willingness to listen. Also, I would like to recognize my grandmother and my late Aunt Becky for their love and kindness, and to express my thanks to my close friend Nikki Hart for lending a sympathetic ear. Finally, I want to show my immense gratitude and appreciation to my fiancé Victor Luciano for his endless love, patience, and encouragement.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

If WOMAN is not permitted to assert a majesty of mind, why fatigue her faculties with the labours of any species of education? why [*sic*] give her books, if she is not to profit by the wisdom they inculcate? [. . .] Man says you *may* read, and you *will* think; but you shall not evince your knowledge, or employ your thoughts, beyond the boundaries which we have set up around you. Then wherefore burthen the young mind with a gaudy outline which man darkens with shades indelible? why [*sic*] expand the female heart, merely to render it more conscious that it is, by the tyranny of custom, rendered vulnerable?<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the eighteenth century, Mary Robinson's text delineates the restrictive nature of female education determined by established boundaries of gender roles. Robinson's expressed frustration raises an important point regarding the inherent contradiction in the contemporary system of female education: the inhibition of female mental development due to the projection of eighteenth-century social values on female corporeality and gendered behavior. Female education appeared as a subject of interest in the late seventeenth century and remained an important issue in treatises, pamphlets, and novels alike throughout the eighteenth century. This heated debate primarily focused on women's struggle for improved, if not equal, education for young girls and women who had previously been denied in-depth scholarly studies. Robinson's passionate

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This dissertation follows the style of *Modern Language Association (MLA) Handbook*.

<sup>1</sup> Robinson, Mary. *A Letter to the Women of England, on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*. 1799. Ed. Sharon M. Setzer. Ontario: Broadview, 2003. Print. 78.

appeal for educational and social reform reflects the general exasperation felt by women writers regarding the conflicts between the social understanding of female mental capabilities and their conventional gender roles within the domestic and public spheres.

In light of this concern, this dissertation concerns the efforts of British women writers, during the period of the 1790s to the early 1800s, who advocated that “education cannot *unsex* a woman”<sup>2</sup> through the ironical representation of the “improperly educated” female character within their novels. I define the “improperly educated” woman as one who is rationally educated, a process which has taught her to rely on her own mental capabilities, and is subsequently both passionately outspoken and inwardly reflective. Employing the methods of feminist literary criticism and history, I explore the novelistic development of the “improperly educated” female character, portraying both autonomy and rationalism, in various degrees of sexuality, intellectualism, and outspokenness. There has been extensive scholarship published on female education in this period, particularly in relation to conduct books, female accomplishments, feminine propriety, and the domesticated woman; however, the mixed characterization of the “improperly educated” woman has not benefited from the same scholarly attention and warrants closer examination. My thesis departs from previous scholarship in my examination of the symbolic function of this alternative character type in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels<sup>3</sup> and delineation of the progression of this recurring figure in relation to the female education continuum within the evolving discourse of

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson 65.

<sup>3</sup> I will specifically explore the representation of the “improperly educated” female character in Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791), Mary Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), and Maria Edgeworth’s *Belinda* (1801).

female learning. I position my argument within the growing body of scholarship on women writers and the novel in relation to the subjects of education, conduct, politics, and society.

In the late seventeenth century, both Bathsua Makin and Mary Astell proposed types of female academies that would provide women with a rational education, and both writers identified “custom” as the source controlling the existing educational system and prohibiting female advancement in learning. During the late seventeenth century, debates on natural rights and individual freedom were ongoing, and a number of women writers, Makin and Astell in particular, entered into this political and theoretical dialogue. In *An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen* (1673), Makin argues, “Women were formerly Educated in the knowledge of Arts and Tongues, and by their Education, many did rise to a great height in Learning. Were Women thus Educated now, I am confident the advantage would be very great: The Women would have Honor and Pleasure; their Relations Profit, and the whole Nation Advantage.”<sup>4</sup> Makin persuasively argues in support of female education by indicating national benefits of enhanced virtue in women and improved female citizens. In an extension of Makin’s argument for female aptitude, Astell declares, in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694), that women are their own rational selves and should be valued independently of men;<sup>5</sup> Astell employs “the language of sovereignty to describe the freedom of the

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<sup>4</sup> Makin, Bathsua. “An Essay to Revive the Antient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Arts & Tongues with the Answer to the Objections against this Way of Education.” 1673. 2-3. *Early English Books Online*. Web. 06 November 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Relying on René Descartes’ account of subjectivity, Astell’s argument is based on the idea that the “individual’s rational self-reliance and her subjection to the monarch depend on each other”; thus, absolutism “guaranteed access to reality and hence served as the basis for the abstract equivalence of all

inward-looking woman.”<sup>6</sup> Astell proposes that a woman should be evaluated by her mind, symbolic of her true self, rather than her body;<sup>7</sup> this proposition was in direct opposition to the existing concept of education as a reinforcement of “obtaining gender definitions.”<sup>8</sup> Late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century women writers rebuked the deficiency of female instruction due to biological sex and condemned the manipulation of education as a means to maintain the division between the sexes. A contemporary of Astell’s, Judith Drake, in *An Essay in the Defence of the Female Sex* (1696), also affirmed female rationality and asserted that women were capable of equal intelligence with men. Throughout the period from approximately 1670 to 1800, both men and women writers debated female education in various genres, such as pamphlets, treatises, drama, and novels.

Regardless of differences on political and social matters, women of multifarious standpoints<sup>9</sup> embraced education as a crucial asset to any woman’s life and “sought, in their different ways, to raise women from their inferior standing relative to men in the household, in cultural representations and in prescriptive social norms, and to refashion

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subjects, both male and female: all are rational and all are equally subjected” (Gallagher “Embracing the Absolute” 35).

<sup>6</sup> Gallagher, Catherine. “Embracing the Absolute: The Politics of the Female Subject in Seventeenth-Century England.” *Genders* 1 (1988): 24-38. Print. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Gallagher 34.

<sup>8</sup> Jones, Vivien. “Education.” *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*. Ed. Vivien Jones. New York: Routledge, 1990. 98-139. Print. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Mitzi Myers, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Anne Mellor initiated a change in classification of women writers according to political beliefs, which was based on Janet Todd’s categorizations in *The Sign of Angellica*. Eve Tavor Bannet’s utilization of the heuristic labels, Matriarchal (formerly known as conservative) and Egalitarian (previously labeled as radical and liberal), demonstrates the importance of refraining from patriarchal, political markers to identify women writers, instead, focusing on their purposes for writing; however, the binary created by her labels has also been contested by feminist critics.

women's manners, women's morals, and women's education to these ends."<sup>10</sup> While the women educationalists were not in perfect unison on all aspects of educational reform, they seemed to agree that a rational component should be incorporated into the revised education program. The social pressure to produce the "proper woman" (abiding by social custom) was channeled into the education system, and girls were accordingly taught appropriate conduct and subjects, which included domestic duties and fashionable accomplishments, in order to become agreeable companions to their future husbands. The feminine accomplishments of music, art, languages, etc. were "directly tied to this new construction of the domestic as a space of authentic (and virtuous) subjectivity"<sup>11</sup> and were viewed as a means for enacting one's gender role.

As a result of these increasing gender restrictions, women writers struggled against the demands of propriety as they pursued their literary aspirations and contributed to the continuing effort for social and educational reform. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (VRW) (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft asserted that the glaring problem with contemporary female education was the focus on superficial actions, such as accomplishments, rather than an emphasis on comprehending the principles behind the behavior. Alan Richardson notes that Wollstonecraft was convinced in VRW that "sexual differences in mind and character are largely if not wholly produced by education."<sup>12</sup> One main contention of Wollstonecraft's educational treatise is her opposition to the

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<sup>10</sup> Bannet, Eve Tavor. *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000. Print. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Bermingham, Ann. *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2000. Print. 184.

<sup>12</sup> Richardson, Alan. *Literature, Education and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. Print. 175.

theoretical assumptions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and conduct book writers in regards to the relation between education and human nature.<sup>13</sup>

The prevalent Rousseauvian belief that females were naturally inferior to males, combined with the application of the Lockean pedagogical principle that virtue and hands-on experience should be valued over academic learning, was ubiquitous throughout eighteenth-century English society. The increasing interest in female education during the last half of the eighteenth century induced women writers to address issues of intellectual equality, female rights, and detrimental effects of traditional educational practices in their writing. Feminine conduct and education had been a topic of concern due to the popularity of conduct books that advanced an idealized conception of the female gender. Proper femininity became synonymous with the highest morality, virtuous behavior, unquestioned acquiescence to patriarchal authority, and continual accommodation of their spouse or suitor. According to predominant social conventions, a woman's depth of knowledge should be congruous with her spouse's work and interests in order that she may converse with him and hold his interest; additionally, a woman should have sufficient knowledge of subjects that would appeal to guests during social visits and dinner parties.

Challenging this belief, Jane West in *The Advantages of Education, or, The History of Maria Williams* (1793) speaks through her "spinster novelist" to argue, as

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<sup>13</sup> Wollstonecraft argues that conduct books, such as Dr. John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774) and James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1767) "have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society" (22). Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, The Wollstonecraft Debate Criticism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Carol H. Poston. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988. Print.

Wollstonecraft had done a year earlier in *VRW*, that female education should be “equipping women for life rather than teaching them how to appeal to men.”<sup>14</sup> Hannah More, who consciously positioned her writing against Wollstonecraft’s radical assertions, inadvertently echoed Wollstonecraft in her attack on fashionable accomplishments and conduct book principles in her providential educational agenda. In *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), More asserts, “while a gentle demeanor is inculcated [in girls], let them not be instructed to practice gentleness merely on the low ground of its being decorous and feminine and pleasing, and calculated to attract human favour.”<sup>15</sup> The construction of this artificial “feminine perfection” was largely a result of the immense influence of conduct books, and as the century progressed, the conduct book was replaced by the novel as the standard genre of female polite writing.<sup>16</sup> As the eighteenth century progressed, many women writers, emboldened in their texts, criticized the association of women’s cognitive processes to her future companionship with her husband. In spite of political differences, select women writers, Sarah Scott, Hannah More, Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Hays, Mary Robinson, Maria Edgeworth, and Amelia Alderson Opie, expressed support, both implicitly and explicitly, for improvement in curriculum standardization and advancement in the quality of education granted to girls and young women as well as

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<sup>14</sup> qtd. in Green, Katherine Sobba. *The Courtship Novel, 1740-1820: A Feminized Genre*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1991. Print. 115.

<sup>15</sup> More, Hannah. *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*. Vol. 1. London: T. Cadell, 1799. 156. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. Web. 1 December 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford UP, 1987. Print. 158.



encouragement for the expansion of the central subject matters. While the specified reasons for changes to be made in female education differed, the recognition and acknowledgement that the education system needed to be improved remained unrelenting among many eighteenth-century women writers, many of whom discerned the need for change based upon their own personal educational experience.

This dissertation will explore the representation of British female education in eighteenth-century novels written by women, specifically the image of the nonconventional woman who refuses to conform to social and gender norms and who becomes labeled as “improperly educated.” Her studies are devoted to history, philosophy, science, languages, theology, and classical texts via self-teaching or a parent’s guidance, an education that is directly opposite to typical female education, which focused on rote learning and superficial accomplishments, such as singing, sewing, and drawing. The character of the “improperly educated” woman does not represent a simple inversion of stereotypical gender characteristics nor should she be interpreted as merely a foil to the ideal heroine. Some eighteenth-century women writers used the paradoxical figure of the “improperly educated” woman to reflect the social injustices committed against women, specifically the inferior education provided to young girls. The “improperly educated” woman possesses rational, self-reflective mental capabilities that tend to be absent in the ideal, domestic heroine; furthermore, she is a complex character who is outspoken and cognizant of the social customs that she rebels against. The character of the “improperly educated” woman should be differentiated from the poorly or incompletely educated female character, such as Charlotte Lennox’s

Arabella, Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, or Maria Edgeworth's *Virginia*, who are ignorant of social mores and must learn through practical experience.<sup>17</sup> My argument will focus on women novelists Inchbald, Hays, and Edgeworth who respectively created versions of the "improperly educated" female character that provided a portrayal of women as intellectually capable and socially redeemable.

I argue that women writers' literary treatment of the "improperly educated" woman provided readers, specifically women, with a deeper understanding of the importance of an improved education, meaning a more diverse and in-depth study of classical and scholarly learning, and a positive portrayal of female identity. Women writers, who utilized fiction as a didactic tool, were able "to intervene in social practice by offering readers alternative models for the conduct of their domestic lives and by moving them to the kinds of domestic and social action they proposed."<sup>18</sup> I argue that these alternative models for conduct included versions of improper female behavior that violated social and gender codes; however, these unconventional models were not put forward as cautionary tales to avoid. Rather, some women novelists employed the character of the "improperly educated" woman to represent independence, rational understanding, and frankness as inclusive of the female sex. This fictional representation was meant to inform women readers of their aptitude for learning and demonstrate the unreasonable restrictions used to govern their sex.

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<sup>17</sup> I am referring to the heroine Arabella in Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), the title character *Evelina* in Burney's *Evelina or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778), and the secondary character of Virginia St. Pierre in Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801).

<sup>18</sup> Bannet 10.

In the chapters that follow, I consider the ways in which women novelists challenged the cultural and social conception of “feminine” as a natural state by depicting alternate female characters such as the “improperly educated” woman.<sup>19</sup> During the period when women novelists became prominent, “the pressure to make their writing (and their behaviour more generally) conform to codes of feminine modesty, was increasingly acutely felt.”<sup>20</sup> In the eighteenth century, the social demands to create “proper, didactic novels” caused women writers, who produced a great quantity of novels,<sup>21</sup> to abide by the literary framework laid out by past male writers, specifically Samuel Richardson. A traditional plot structure in eighteenth-century novels, as seen in Richardson’s *Clarissa*, presented a deviant woman inevitably becoming ill and dying early in life (whether in childbirth or disease) or experiencing the overwhelming desire for death due to the likelihood of further victimization.<sup>22</sup> This type of narrative structure conveyed that improper women could only be redeemed through death. In “polite and acceptable” novels (those approved by male authority), the figure of the “improperly educated” woman provided a sharp contrast to the genteel and modest female protagonist: the character functioned purely as an antithesis to the feminized stereotype rather than as an autonomous subject.

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<sup>19</sup> In a detailed and compelling analysis, Helene Moglen acknowledges that the eighteenth-century novel “more than in any other expressive form, that the social and psychological meanings of gender difference were most extensively negotiated and exposed” (4).

<sup>20</sup> Jones, Vivien. Introduction. *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700-1800*. Ed. Vivien Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 1-24. Print. 10.

<sup>21</sup> In “The Faces of Anonymity,” James Raven provides bibliographic evidence to show that “slightly more novels by women than men identified for the 1780s and 1790s” (150). In the 1770s and 1780s, close to half of the novels published were written anonymously, and the 1790s witnessed a drop to 29 percent of novels contributed to anonymous authorship (Raven 150).

<sup>22</sup> Bowers, Toni. *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print. 222.

The representations of women, found in novels written by Burney, Inchbald, Hays, Edgeworth, Amelia Opie, and Jane Austen, among others, validated other feminine experiences outside of the proper model through the portrayal of “improperly educated” women who showed signs of agency and independent, rational thinking in opposition to traditional women of virtue (seen as properly educated) who appeared passive and dependent upon supervision by masculine authority figures. Bärbel Czennia insightfully observes, deviant women “are presented [in writing] as mixed characters—licentious *and* learned, learned *and* courageous, courageous *and* cross-dressing, temporarily cross-dressing *and yet* family-oriented—violations of female-gender assumptions as fascinating, and gender identities as unstable and shifting.”<sup>23</sup> The “improperly educated” female character, identified as a mixed character, caused readers to question the stability and legitimacy of the domestic ideology that attempted to confine women to the private realm.

***Feminist Literary History of Eighteenth-Century Texts, the Novel, and Education***

The tradition of scholarship treating eighteenth-century literature through the lens of gender has been rich. Within feminist literary criticism of the eighteenth century, three influential scholars, Mary Poovey, Nancy Armstrong, and Janet Todd argued respectively that eighteenth-century women novelists adhered to the sentimental ideology of femininity in their authorial identities as well as in their texts.<sup>24</sup> Poovey, for instance, underscores Wollstonecraft’s, Mary Shelley’s, and Jane Austen’s struggles to

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<sup>23</sup> Czennia, Bärbel. “Daring Eccentrics: Popular Biography and Female Deviance in the Later Eighteenth Century.” *Eighteenth-Century Women* 4 (2006): 215-58. Print. 243.

<sup>24</sup> I am specifically referring to Poovey’s *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984), Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), and Todd’s *The Sign of Angellica* (1989).

reconcile the conflicting identities of proper sexuality and professional writing; however, despite differing responses to their “ideological situation”<sup>25</sup> as women, each successfully resolved the conflict between sexual norms and individual self by employing the literary techniques of “indirection and accommodation”<sup>26</sup> to satisfy both sides. In her influential book, Armstrong, incisively challenges Ian Watt’s historical account of the rise of the novel, and asserts that women novelists enjoyed literary authority by utilizing language deemed appropriate for women to subvert the sexual contract;<sup>27</sup> therefore, women were able to express their opinions and concerns on topics pertaining to the domestic sphere, propriety, and sensibility. Todd’s revisionist analysis of the history of the novel broadened the scope of female novelists, many of them professional writers who benefited from the proper female persona, considered in the canon.

Throughout the last decade of the twentieth century, feminist critics, Mitzi Myers, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Anne Mellor, among others, opposed several of the views presented by Poovey and Armstrong specifically. Mellor, for instance, contests the “seamless account of the triumph of a hegemonic domestic ideology in England between 1750 and 1850” that served as a basis for both Poovey and Armstrong’s arguments regarding women’s bold challenges to combat the confining domestic ideology during this period.<sup>28</sup> Another issue disputed by critics in the 1990s is Poovey and Armstrong’s (as well as the general feminist literary criticism of the 1980s) assumption of the

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<sup>25</sup> Poovey, Mary. *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984. Print. 242.

<sup>26</sup> Poovey 242.

<sup>27</sup> Armstrong 42.

<sup>28</sup> Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print. 83.

stringent demarcation between the public and private spheres. Ensuing scholarship by Amanda Vickery, Lawrence E. Klein, and many others has revealed that the perception of the two spheres' separation between the sexes was mistaken: "The way writers described these spheres did not necessarily reflect their actual operations."<sup>29</sup> This identification of the fluidity between spheres<sup>30</sup> caused feminist literary and historical scholars to reexamine the correlation between the cultural assumptions concerning eighteenth-century women's lives and the influence of nineteenth-century literary historiography on contemporary criticism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>31</sup>

The critical focus on women's private sphere confinement, domestic roles, and feminine sensibility has begun to diminish in the past fifteen years as burgeoning studies on eighteenth-century women writers have emerged that investigate women's active role in several public arenas, including literary production and dissemination and philanthropy. In *Nobody's Story* (1994), Catherine Gallagher provides a cogent analysis of eighteenth-century women writers' strategies to capitalize on "remunerative authorship"<sup>32</sup> through rhetorically constructed "author-selves"<sup>33</sup> under the "theme of

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<sup>29</sup> Boyd, Diane E. and Marta Kvanne, ed. Introduction: "Reading Women, Reading Public and Private." *Everyday Revolutions: Eighteenth-Century Women Transforming Public and Private*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2008. 17-29. Print. 19-20.

<sup>30</sup> Contemporary scholars assumed the rigid division between the spheres not only established by eighteenth-century fictional representations but also due to Jürgen Habermas' mid-twentieth century theory of the bourgeois public sphere. In recent years, critics have contested Habermas' theory due to the inconsistencies regarding the public sphere's time of origination and its exclusive nature from women and other lower classes.

<sup>31</sup> Ezell, Margaret J.M. *Writing Women's Literary History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993. Print. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Gallagher, Catherine. *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994. Print. xii.

<sup>33</sup> Gallagher xix.

dispossession”<sup>34</sup> common to both male and female authors. Paula McDowell documents early eighteenth-century lower class women’s religio-political engagement with print culture as writers, printers, and booksellers in *The Women of Grub Street* (1998) and argues that the category of “woman,” as representative of an universal moral and proper female, counteracted non-elite women’s agency in the political public realm in the mid-to late eighteenth century. In an effort to participate in the public sphere, late eighteenth-century women writers, as argued by Patricia Comitini, employ a type of “vocational philanthropy”<sup>35</sup> through the production of prose narratives intended to instill a new feminine sensibility in women of the middling and poor classes; More and Edgeworth, for instance, felt it necessary to inspire proper behavior and reading practices in an effort to encourage female rationality and improve society.

During the 1990s, feminist recovery of eighteenth-century women writers continued; however, in an attempt to create a tradition for women authors, modern feminist critics interpreted and analyzed these eighteenth-century texts within a particular framework of opposition and subversion to canonical male narratives. Consequently, as Margaret J.M. Ezell, Betty A. Schellenberg, and Laura J. Rosenthal have each individually asserted, this ideological construction has limited a full understanding of women writers’ literary and historical influence and intellectual

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<sup>34</sup> Gallagher xxi.

<sup>35</sup> Comitini, Patricia. *Vocational Philanthropy and British Women’s Writing, 1790-1810: Wollstonecraft, More, Edgeworth, Wordsworth*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2005. Print. 4.

significance.<sup>36</sup> In her compelling study, *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2005), Schellenberg addresses the trend in feminist literary history to accentuate the eighteenth-century woman writer's gender, which is associated with submissiveness to patriarchal demand, and argues for a reconsideration of the conceptual framework used to evaluate the extent of eighteenth-century women's agency in the literary domain. In Susan Staves' impressive survey of British women writers in *A Literary History of Women's Writing in Britain, 1660-1789* (2006), she also reprehends the lack of insightful criticism of recuperated women writers' works and argues that the twentieth-century assumption of seventeenth and eighteenth-century women's oppression has been erroneously attributed to them in preceding feminist literary histories.

The field of the eighteenth-century novel has been enriched by the influential analyses of Jane Spencer, Michael McKeon, and Armstrong and has since evolved in the past twenty years to comprise studies of the novel and themes of literacy and reading habits, female agency, and sexuality.<sup>37</sup> In *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (1990), J. Paul Hunter argues that the novel's didactic purpose developed in direct response to the spread of literacy in Britain and the need to educate the emerging literate classes. The eighteenth-century novel functioned in

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<sup>36</sup> See Ezell's *Writing Women's Literary History* (1993), Schellenberg's "Writing Eighteenth-Century Women's Literary History, 1986 to 2006" (2007), and Rosenthal's "Introduction: Recovering from Recovery" (2009).

<sup>37</sup> Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (1986), Michael McKeon's *Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (1987) and Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987) offered distinct revisionist arguments to Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1957).



varying degrees between dangerous pleasure reading to instructive conduct models for imitation; moreover, as Jacqueline Pearson contends in *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835* (1999), shared reading of novels had the potential to create communities between women readers and strengthen familial bonds between readers and listeners. Conversely, in her persuasive analysis in *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel* (2000), Eve Tavor Bannet examines women novelists' conscious efforts to advise female readers of the appropriate response to certain domestic and social situations and "to raise women from their inferior standing relative to men in the household, in cultural representations and in prescriptive social norms."<sup>38</sup>

Late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century feminists scrutinized the fictional representations of eighteenth-century controversial views on motherhood and female sexuality. In "Colonizing the Breast," Ruth Perry discusses the prevalent trope of motherhood in eighteenth-century English literature and the desexualization of literary heroines as both men and women novelists began to portray mothers as simply maternal in order to define the female sex collectively by their gender and to inflict punishment for improper behavior.<sup>39</sup> Toni Bowers' informative study in *The Politics of Motherhood* (1996) provides a historical account of motherhood, specifically the failure of mothers to adhere to the bourgeois ideology of maternity, and woman's feminine virtue as represented in canonical texts of Daniel Defoe and Richardson; moreover, Bowers' analysis of Richardson's *Clarissa* persuasively argues that Richardson portrayed

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<sup>38</sup> Bannet 7.

<sup>39</sup> Perry, Ruth. "Colonizing the Breast: Sexuality and Maternity in Eighteenth-Century England." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2.2 (1991): 204-34. Print. 210.

motherhood and woman's feminine virtue as in conflict and ultimately irreconcilable.<sup>40</sup>

In *Mothering Daughters* (2002), Susan C. Greenfield argues that in eighteenth-century novels *Evelina*, *Belinda*, and *Emma*, novelists used the figure of the absent mother to critique the idealized cultural image of maternity and to show the importance of maternal authority in a young woman's emotional and intellectual development.

The subject of eighteenth-century female education has been addressed by Richard A. Barney, Stephen Bygrave, Michèle Cohen, Elizabeth Eger, Mary Hilton, Gary Kelly, Alan Richardson, Jill Shefrin, among others, in response to the absence of women in previous histories of education. The need to redefine current understanding of the history of education in eighteenth-century Britain appears to be the general consensus among scholars. Critics have begun to adopt a renewed approach to the history of education by reconsidering traditional views on foundational educational theories of John Locke, Rousseau, and More; reexamining neglected systems of education, i.e. domestic education and schools for girls; and reevaluating the uses of women's education in the eighteenth century. In *Literature, Education, and Romanticism* (1994), Richardson asserts that education cannot be disassociated from politics, religion, economics, or gender; moreover, it forms a conceptual space where these issues and "social history, ideology, and literary representations of all kinds meet, interpenetrate, and collide."<sup>41</sup> Barney, in *Plots of Enlightenment* (1999), extends the study of the history of the novel to consider the influential aim of early eighteenth-century educational

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<sup>40</sup> Bowers, Toni. *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680-1760*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print. 223.

<sup>41</sup> Richardson 2.

theory to arrange “a provisional alliance between the contending values of individual autonomy and social discipline”<sup>42</sup> in order to advance an ideal cultural identity that in turn was represented and promoted in the novel. The influence of women’s shifting social and cultural roles in eighteenth-century England affected the continuing debates over female education; according to Bygrave, during the 1790s, women writers and educationalists focused their attention to questioning the purposes of women’s education to promote women’s agency and to improve women’s lives.

***Combating Inferior Feminine Education: Inchbald, Hays, and Edgeworth***

The three chapters of this dissertation collectively plot the trajectory of the “improperly educated” woman through three novels (Inchbald’s *A Simple Story*, Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, and Edgeworth’s *Belinda*) published within the period of 1791 to 1801. Each chapter is devoted to a single text and focuses on the women writer’s reactions and responses to the education system as a tool used in British society to maintain the established gender boundaries that severely restricted the identity and contributions of the female sex. The central theme of the dissertation is to argue that these women novelists successfully employed the figure of “improperly educated” woman to portray the irony of an education that does not enlighten but rather restricts and censors.

In the first chapter, “The ‘Tragic’ Result of Im(Proper) Education in *A Simple Story*”, I examine Elizabeth Inchbald’s evaluation of the implications of proper and

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<sup>42</sup> Barney, Richard A. *Plots of Enlightenment: Education and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. Print. 13.

superficial female instruction and the negative representations of the comprehensive system of female education. In analyzing the two heroines, Miss Milner and Matilda Elmwood, in association with the main secondary characters of Miss Woodley and Miss Fenton, I argue that the limitations inherent in the existing educational system become manifested within these female characters and posit that they remain vulnerable to patriarchal demands and whims despite social class or education. In relation to the education continuum, the three latter female characters who are plotted near the extremity of proper education fare little better than the former who is positioned at the opposing end of deviance and impropriety. Framing my argument through the lens of the “improperly educated” woman, it is my contention that the absence of this character type, who would occupy the intermediate position on the education continuum, reveals Inchbald’s struggle to imagine fully the viability of this character type as an alternative to the recurrent literary figures of the fallen woman and the proper woman. Published near the beginning of the 1790s, this novel brings to the forefront the conflict between females’ aptitude for higher level learning and restrictive social custom and gender roles, perpetuated by female education.

In chapter two, entitled “Empowerment of the ‘Improperly Educated’ Woman in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*”, I continue my survey of the development and function of the “improperly educated” female character within Mary Hays’ epistolary novel. In this chapter, I consider Hays’ challenge to the cultural and social conception of the proper, feminine woman through her unconventional and bold placement of the “improperly educated” woman, represented by Emma Courtney, in the roles of narrator, heroine, and

fallen woman. As an adult, Emma fluctuates between the points of equilibrium to the edge of impropriety on the education continuum, yet she ultimately fails to maintain a perfect balance between reason and emotion due to external pressures. In analyzing the ironic display of Emma's "improper" education, which indicts the deficient educational system, I argue that Emma's erudition, rational pursuits, passion, and ambition are represented as positive reinforcements to the intellectual capabilities of the female sex; furthermore, this protagonist represents Hays' efforts to unite and balance the gender distinctions of masculine rationality and feminine sensibility into the figure of the "improperly educated" woman. Hays' effective exploitation of female "miseducation" reveals the enduring effects of gender-based education and satirizes the traditional ideal female character. In effect, she authenticates this figure as a constructive model of reconciliation between female subjectivity and the gender-divided curriculum.

The third chapter, "Female Education Reexamined: Transformation of the 'Improperly Educated' Woman in *Belinda*", explores the assimilation and influence of female "improper" education within the domestic sphere in Maria Edgeworth's novel. In response to the political radicalism that spanned the last decade of the eighteenth century, the character of the "improperly educated" woman gradually shifts from an alternative female character, whose rational education is a social deterrence, to a domestic heroine, whose rational prudence is considered beneficial to her family; however, this figure continues to signify the complex negotiation between gender construction, rational education, and female subjectivity. Edgeworth's text contributes to the developing definition of the "improperly educated" woman through the illustrations

of variant versions of female “miseducation” within the presumed opposing characters of Belinda Portman and Lady Delacour. Both female characters oscillate between multiple points of superficiality, impropriety, and rational understanding along the education continuum as both women respectively undergo different degrees of reformation. I assert that Edgeworth engages the contemporaneous debate on education to expose the continued incongruity between rational education and idealistic femininity.

### ***Conclusion***

These eighteenth-century texts demonstrate the important role played by the “improperly educated” female character in regards to eighteenth and early nineteenth-century women writers’ efforts to promote female education, encourage female autonomy, and demonstrate women’s capabilities for self-improvement. The novel genre was valuable to women writers who explored unrealistic or unimaginable (according to the contemporary culture) versions of the female character regarding behavior, mental capabilities, and potential life opportunities; the heroines could be flawed characters who succeed even though “improperly educated.” Inchbald, Hays, and Edgeworth used fictional narratives to reveal the difficulties of strict adherence to proper femininity and to demonstrate alternative behavior that afforded women the opportunity to develop strength of mind and their own voice.

## CHAPTER II

THE “TRAGIC” RESULT OF IM(PROPER) EDUCATION IN A *SIMPLE STORY*

In 1791, Elizabeth Inchbald published *A Simple Story* amid the turbulence of the French Revolution; furthermore, the novel’s arrival occurred between the publications of two significant educational treatises: Catharine Macaulay’s *Letters on Education* (1790) and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In *A Simple Story*, Inchbald chose to evaluate explicitly two disparate types of conventional education, fashionable accomplishments and proper gender-appropriate instruction. Eighteenth-century readers would have intuitively known that education referred to instruction regarding basic subjects, domestic duties, appropriate conduct, and religion and morality. Female education encompassed not only the study of approved subject matters, such as history or grammar, but also comprised “all social influences that form mind and character.”<sup>43</sup> The novel’s resolution, considered by reviewers and critics alike to be Inchbald’s final assessment on women’s education, thus including social custom as well, quickly became at issue in contemporary reviews. It has continued to be a contested point for modern critics as well; scholars have been divided regarding the meaning of the novel’s end. The critical scrutiny of the concluding and ambiguous last lines of the novel has resulted in varied interpretations. Some have viewed the final words as comparable to an explicit moral; while others have considered the narrative’s conclusion as reparation for the first half of the novel. Many scholars have agreed with the narrator’s descriptions of Miss Milner’s education as negative and destructive and

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<sup>43</sup> Rogers, Katharine M. “Elizabeth Inchbald: Not Such a Simple Story.” *Living by the Pen: Early British Women Writers*. Ed. Dale Spender. New York: Teachers College P, 1992. 82-90. Print. 83.

Matilda's learning as positive and virtuous. Moreover, a number of critics have maintained that the ending lines were reflective of Inchbald's desire to adhere to the conventions of courtship novels.

In *Masquerade and Civilization*, Terry Castle argues that the novel's last words of "PROPER EDUCATION [*sic*]" serve as a reminder that the novel in its entirety has failed to provide "any prescriptive rendering of female socialization"<sup>44</sup>; furthermore, she asserts that the novel is a "story of failed 'education' [...] a lyrical assault, a rhapsody of transgression, in which masculine authority is insistently demystified, female aspiration rewarded, and the conventional world of eighteenth-century representation transformed in consequence."<sup>45</sup> Jane Spencer likewise insists that education is employed negatively throughout the novel, "not adding wisdom but imposing taboos;"<sup>46</sup> Spencer characterizes the second half of the novel as a type of expiation for Miss Milner's rebelliousness and sexual aggressiveness and argues that the "happy" ending is appropriate for the proper, submissive Matilda, "who restore[s] [. . .] feminine propriety."<sup>47</sup> Critics Gary Kelly, Tobi Kozakewich, and Jo Alyson Parker each maintain that Inchbald advocates for Matilda's "proper" education in the "school of prudence—though of adversity."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the connection between Matilda's education and her renewed proprietary rights becomes a recurring topic among scholars. Kelly contends that the narrator's final

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<sup>44</sup> Castle, Terry. *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1986. Print. 293.

<sup>45</sup> Castle 293.

<sup>46</sup> Spencer, Jane. Introduction. *A Simple Story*. 1791. By Elizabeth Inchbald. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988: vii-xx. Print. xv.

<sup>47</sup> Spencer xx.

<sup>48</sup> Inchbald, Elizabeth. *A Simple Story*. 1791. Ed. Anna Lott. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview P, 2007. Print. 342.



comments on education reflect the positive benefits of Matilda's gender-appropriate education therefore constructing Matilda as a paradigmatic figure for ideal female behavior.<sup>49</sup> Kozakewich interprets the ambiguous final discussion on education as proof that Matilda's "proper education" will in effect secure the longevity and success of the Matilda's and Rushbrook's impending marriage.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Parker, Patricia Meyer Spacks, and Virginia H. Cope respectively discuss the advantages of Matilda's obedience and submissiveness as she reaps the rewards of patriarchy: parental love, approved marriage, and lawful inheritance.<sup>51</sup> However, not all critics judge the closure as a success of proper education.

George E. Haggerty regards the novel's ending as the suitable yet unhappy resolution to two narratives of female degradation under the authority of the patriarchal figure of Lord Elmwood.<sup>52</sup> John Morillo's interpretation similarly considers the ambiguous ending of Matilda's and Rushbrook's future as consistent with Inchbald's intention to "tell a revisionary story about the consequences of the mother's fall."<sup>53</sup> Parker asserts that the reference to proper education in the last lines criticizes Miss Milner's dependence upon her beauty, instilled in her by her education, rather than her

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<sup>49</sup> Kelly, Gary. *The English Jacobin Novel: 1780-1805*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1976. Print. 72-3.

<sup>50</sup> Kozakewich, Tobi. "Evelina's Simple Story: Sentimentality in Burney's and Inchbald's First Novels." *Eighteenth-Century Women: Studies in their Lives, Work, and Culture* 4 (2006): 159-84. Print. 181.

<sup>51</sup> I am referring to Jo Alyson Parker's article "Complicating 'A Simple Story': Inchbald's Two Versions of Female Power" (1997), Patricia Meyer Spacks's *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (2006), and Virginia H. Cope's *Property, Education, and Identity in late Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Heroine of Disinterest* (2009).

<sup>52</sup> Haggerty, George E. "Female Abjection in Inchbald's A Simple Story." *SEL* 36 (1996): 655-71. Print. 669-70.

<sup>53</sup> Morillo, John. "Editing Eve: Rewriting the Fall in Austen's *Persuasion* and Inchbald's *A Simple Story*." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 23.1 (2010): 195-223. Print. 223.

intellect, reflecting Wollstonecraft's later condemnation of this conduct in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, Miss Milner's coquettish behavior and uninhibited voice cannot be permitted and this frivolity and rebelliousness is succeeded by the virtuous education of Matilda. In her cogent analysis of the novel in the 1790s, Spacks views the moralistic conclusion as accentuating the result of a proper education, which "generates sensibility,"<sup>55</sup> thus relating femininity with sentimentality and weakness. Inchbald effectively emphasizes the irony that gender-appropriate education creates the issue of feminine sensibility, which is subsequently criticized by society as an innate weakness of the female sex. Additionally, Matilda's proper female education implies "a realistic perception of the existing institutions of power," as Amy Garnai concludes, and this proper instruction furthermore directs "the possibilities for action within them."<sup>56</sup>

In the novel's concluding penultimate paragraph, the narrator provides a clarification of Matilda's education as not simply in the "school of adversity"<sup>57</sup> as first described, rather her intellectual and moral cultivation is obtained from the "school of prudence—though of adversity."<sup>58</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines prudence as "the ability to recognize and follow the most suitable or sensible course of action [. . .]

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<sup>54</sup> Parker, Jo Alyson. "Complicating 'A Simple Story': Inchbald's Two Versions of Female Power." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 30.3 (1997): 255-70. Print. 260.

<sup>55</sup> Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "Novels of the 1790s: Action and Impasse." *The Columbia History of the British Novel*. Ed. John Richetti. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. 247-74. Print. 264.

<sup>56</sup> Garnai, Amy. *Revolutionary Imaginings in the 1790s: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, Elizabeth Inchbald*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print. 130.

<sup>57</sup> Inchbald 244.

<sup>58</sup> Inchbald 342.

discretion, circumspection, [or] caution.”<sup>59</sup> In an issue of *The Idler* published in 1759, Samuel Johnson provides a more compelling definition of this moral virtue: “[prudence] requires neither extensive view nor profound search, but forces itself, by spontaneous impulse, upon a mind neither great nor busy, neither ingrossed by vast designs, nor distracted by multiplicity of attention.”<sup>60</sup> Consequently, Matilda’s proper education, predicated on the value of prudence, determines the unremarkable effects of a neutral existence, in which “prudence keeps [her] life safe [. . .] but does not make it happy.”<sup>61</sup> Matilda’s prudent education ironically constructs and restricts the female subject into a position of subordination in the patriarchal hierarchy of English society.

Most of these scholars agree that Inchbald most likely felt compelled to end the novel with the “happy” conventional ending of marriage and father’s approval, which could only be bestowed upon Matilda as the exemplary figure of proper, prudent femininity. However, the conventional “happy ending” seems to escape the character of Matilda (and clearly of Miss Milner) as Haggerty has revealed. Critical analyses of the novel’s ending are in conflict with the evaluation of the particular extent of positive and negative effects of proper education. The indefinite conclusion poses more questions than answers to the ending result of Matilda’s education within the novel. In the novel’s closure, the narrator asks, “what may not be hoped from that school of prudence—though of adversity—in which Matilda was bred?”<sup>62</sup> This question seems to imply that

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<sup>59</sup> “Prudence.” Def. 1. *OED Online*. December 2011. Oxford University Press. 4 February 2012. <<http://www.oed.com.lib-ezproxy.tamu.edu:2048/view/Entry/153584?redirectedFrom=prudence>>.

<sup>60</sup> Johnson, Samuel. “Prudence.” *The Idler*. Vol. 2. London: J. Newbery, 1761. 19-23. Print. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson 20.

<sup>62</sup> Inchbald 342.

Matilda is rewarded for her proper education; however, it is important for readers to review Matilda's seemingly enviable gains. Near the closing of the final volume, readers learn that Matilda has been kidnapped by Lord Margrave, whose intended purpose is to rape her, yet she is saved from this violation by the appearance of her father.

Subsequently, she is reconciled with her estranged father, who has undergone a sudden and complete transformation from tyrant to doting parent. Although she is restored to her lawful place as Lady Matilda Elmwood, she does not obtain the legal right to inherit her family estate due to Lord Elmwood's decision to keep Rushbrook as his heir. Matilda is lastly bestowed the power to decide her and Rushbrook's fates, amid her recent emotional turmoil and despite her brotherly affection for him. Predictably, Matilda acts as the passive agent in the circumstances of her kidnapping, her rescue, her reconciliation with her father, and her reinstatement as the recognized child of Lord Elmwood. However, in a twist of fate, Matilda, who is happily becoming acquainted with her father, is now presented with the dilemma of altering her situation and consequently affecting the nature of her relationship with her father as she will be required to give her undivided attention to her husband.

Unlike Brian McCrea's or Barbara Judson's contention that Matilda gains freedom to choose her fate,<sup>63</sup> it is my assertion that Lord Elmwood granting Matilda authority to accept or decline Rushbrook does not reflect Matilda's complete autonomy. Her strong desire to please her father and her submissive demeanor would undoubtedly

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<sup>63</sup> McCrea, Brian. *Impotent Fathers: Patriarchy and Demographic Crisis in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 1998. Print. 172. Please also refer to Judson, Barbara. "The Psychology of Satan: Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*." *ELH* 76.3 (2009): 599-624. Print. 620.

be major factors in her decision process. Matilda's "freedom" is burdened with a daughter's filial duty of obedience and her responsibility of securing the family fortune. What *can* be hoped for Matilda who has been educated in the school of prudence yet of adversity? Unfortunately, the narrator's conspicuous question is not answered by the novel and Matilda's future happiness seems questionable. The reader is left to surmise the continuing effects of Matilda's prudent education. It can be inferred that Matilda's education fails to produce any genuine benefits to the young woman whose "inheritance [is] regained only indirectly"<sup>64</sup> and who essentially becomes a part of the Elmwood estate passing to Rushbrook. The question also remains whether Miss Milner's lack of moral education ironically shields her from her daughter's fate of a prosaic existence of submissiveness.

In my consideration, the novel's ending is reflective of Inchbald's struggle to reconcile female deviant behavior with the contemporary education system. Although it may seem as if Inchbald's ending completely conforms to novelistic tradition, I contend that Inchbald's conclusion is written in the same manner as the rest of the novel, i.e. an equivocal consideration of female education and gendered behavior. The purpose of the novel seems unclear, and it does not entirely lend itself to the interpretation of triumphant proper education. While past scholars have primarily focused on the distinctions between the educations of Miss Milner and Matilda Elmwood, I argue that Inchbald represents versions of conventional education through both primary and secondary female characters. My focus for this chapter is to explore the negative

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<sup>64</sup> Cope, Virginia H. *Property, Education, and Identity in late Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Heroine of Disinterest*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print. 84.

representations of female education, which in effect condemn the limitations of the female education system as a whole, through the two female protagonists, Miss Milner and Matilda and to consider other characters as well, i.e. Miss Woodley and Miss Fenton. I frame my argument of Inchbald's novel of education through the particular lens of the "improperly educated" female character, whose impropriety ironically stems from rational thinking, outspokenness, and agency. The trajectory of this character type in the latter half of the eighteenth century reveals women's engagement with the issues of gender relations and female learning as they used this character to explore alternatives to the current situation.

Accordingly, the absence of this character type of the "improperly educated" woman is telling in *A Simple Story*; Inchbald cannot reconcile the disparities between female educations in one figure, yet she centralizes the focus on female learning and conduct within the novel. It is even more curious to consider this character's absence within the context of Inchbald's support of radical politics, her association with the Jacobin circle, and the contemporary publications of novels and treatises alike, such as Wollstonecraft's *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790), expounding on the idea of rational improvement in female education. The novel, during the eighteenth century was "heavily influenced by the aim in contemporaneous educational writing to negotiate a provisional alliance between the contending values of individual autonomy and social discipline."<sup>65</sup> Inchbald joins the dialogue on education less aggressively in this novel than other Jacobin women writers, but Inchbald

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<sup>65</sup> Barney 13.

nonetheless does not recoil from the subject. Candace Ward explains that both Miss Milner and later her daughter, Matilda, “struggle against-and appear to lose to-mutually exclusive paradigms of proper and improper female behavior.”<sup>66</sup> The explicit binary opposition between Miss Milner’s and Matilda’s educations and actions emphasizes the need for a balance between the two extremes. Although Jo Alyson Parker astutely observed Inchbald’s failure to provide a female figure who would serve as an intermediate between the feminine ideal and the deviant woman, Parker overlooks more contemporary novels in concluding that this alternative character is first provided in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. Inchbald oscillates between her compelling portrayal of a passionate and intractable heroine and the eighteenth-century convention of the heroine as an imitative model of virtuous femininity.

In this novel, Inchbald does not merely portray proper or improper education; instead, she divides the novel in half to depict the two ends of the educational spectrum for females. However, this lack of a compromise between the two extremes should be explored in depth as well. If the four prevalent female characters, i.e. Miss Milner, Miss Woodley, Miss Fenton, and Matilda Elmwood, were plotted upon a continuum, then there would be an unequal fluctuation between the latter three women comprising the endpoint of proper education and Miss Milner occupying the opposite extremity of superficial, fashionable education. Despite the numerical advantage of properly educated women, I would argue that Inchbald’s argument for education appears in a more subtle fashion. The novel does present to varying degrees several types of education:

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<sup>66</sup> Ward, Candace. “Inordinate Desire: Schooling the Senses in Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story*.” *Studies in the Novel* 31.1 (1999): 1-18. Print. 2.

fashionable boarding school, religious studies, male-mentor, and home teaching. In *Letters on Education*, Catharine Macaulay writes, “The situation and education of women [. . .] is precisely that which must necessarily tend to corrupt and debilitate both the powers of mind and body.”<sup>67</sup> As noted, the two heroines are presented as antitheses of one another, one superficially educated and the other properly taught, but the coalescing factor is the ultimate failure of contemporary education for either woman. Despite this apparent binary construction between the mother and daughter, I argue that Inchbald effectively yet satirically shows the hazards that both women face as a result of their education. Neither Miss Milner nor Matilda exemplifies the “improperly educated” woman, who is rationally and classically educated, intellectually autonomous, and verbally assertive, as an individual character. However, it is significant to note that an amalgamation of characteristics from each female protagonist would produce this ironic “miseducation” that is found in later novels and treatises. The representational absence of a balanced female education, which would occupy the intermediate position on the education continuum, reveals Inchbald’s underlying skepticism of the potentiality of an improved state of education within contemporary society. Notably, the combination of mother and daughter would approximate the rational female figure described in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Inchbald’s novel offers a glimpse to the future development of this debate and in some ways anticipates Wollstonecraft’s rational woman and Hays’ combination of reason and passion within one female figure.

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<sup>67</sup> Macaulay, Catharine. *Letters on Education: With Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects*. 1790. New York: Garland, 1974. Print. 207.



Past scholars have argued that Inchbald possibly composed the novel beginning in the late 1770s; consequently, this earlier period of composition likely influenced Inchbald's writing as she struggled to resolve the issues relating to gender construction and socially prescribed conduct and to present females as intellectual, sexual beings. In the novel's Preface, Inchbald subtly criticizes her own education, which was "confined to the narrow boundaries prescribed [to] her sex,"<sup>68</sup> as she describes a brief account of her life before becoming an author. Although Inchbald presents several versions of female education in the novel, she fails to resolve the conflict between social notions of proper femininity and innate female nature and a woman's capability for intellectual and social development. It seems that, ultimately, Inchbald is unable to fully imagine the character of an "improperly educated" woman as a viable alternative to the recurrent literary figures of the fallen woman and the proper woman. While later writers, such as Hays, successfully reconcile the conflicting construction of gendered behavior and woman's intellectual ambitions within one character, Inchbald demonstrates the challenge to find a balance between the two extremes of the female educational continuum. This novel offered female readers with a realistic sense of the female sex's inherent struggle to alter their circumstances through education. Inchbald's novel successfully portrays the incongruous structure of the current education system.

### ***The Nature of Education***

From the beginning of the novel, Miss Milner's education and experiences in a fashionable boarding school become a recurrent theme in the first two volumes and a

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<sup>68</sup> Inchbald 55.

source of contention for her guardian Dorriforth and the Jesuit priest Sandford. Her education “had left her mind without one ornament, except those which nature gave, and even they were not wholly preserved from the ravages made by its rival, *Art*.”<sup>69</sup> Armed with the natural advantages of beauty and innate intelligence, Miss Milner’s fashionable education only teaches her to exploit her “female nature” to her benefit. Due to Mrs. Milner’s stipulation that her daughter be educated in her Protestant religion and Mr. Milner’s compliance with this request, Miss Milner’s parents must assume the majority of the blame for their daughter’s frivolous schooling and her subsequent fascination with superficial accomplishments and her physical appearance. Macaulay perceptively argued that “all those vices and imperfections which have been generally regarded as inseparable from the female character, do not in any manner proceed from sexual causes, but are entirely the effects of situation and education.”<sup>70</sup> As a representative of education and virtue, the mother dooms her daughter to a narrow and frivolous education. The mother’s legacy to her daughter impairs her daughter’s mental development for the sake of “frivolous qualification[s].”<sup>71</sup> The narrator reveals two similarities between the mother and daughter: both are only identified through their respective kinship with Mr. Milner and share Protestant beliefs. When readers are introduced to the character of Miss Milner, the narrator emphasizes the deficiency of her education but also concedes that she has innate intellect.

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<sup>69</sup> Inchbald 61.

<sup>70</sup> Macaulay 202.

<sup>71</sup> Inchbald 61.

The narrator describes Miss Milner as possessing attributes of “lively elegance,” “dignified simplicity,” and a “quick sensibility,” and her beauty is “united with sense and with virtue.”<sup>72</sup> The narrator, however, is quick to note that Miss Milner’s sense is equal to “that which frail mortals commonly possess”<sup>73</sup> and should not be misconstrued for an acquired understanding. Nevertheless, the frivolously-educated Miss Milner shares an understanding equal to the agreeable Miss Woodley, who received a proper but narrow education. It is significant that these two women, whose educational backgrounds differ greatly, possess equivalent levels of comprehension due in part to Miss Milner’s inherent intelligence. Miss Milner’s intrinsic abilities circumvent the conventional belief of female’s “natural inferiority” both physically and mentally. Although Miss Milner’s education is explicitly censured throughout the novel, it seems that Inchbald is concurrently criticizing female education as a whole. Miss Woodley’s proper educational upbringing fails ultimately to provide any distinction in intellect between her and Miss Milner. This irony would not have escaped the discerning eyes of female readers who were intimately acquainted with the narrowness of female education.

Dorriforth, to his own surprise, admits that Miss Milner draws a “greater resemblance”<sup>74</sup> to her father than he had imagined; yet, the reader is left to surmise the specific characteristics shared by the father and daughter. Notably, it is Miss Milner’s liveliness in conversation that prompts Dorriforth’s admission and implicit compliment to his young ward. Miss Milner compensates for the lack of rational knowledge in her

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<sup>72</sup> Inchbald 69.

<sup>73</sup> Inchbald 69.

<sup>74</sup> Inchbald 70.

educational background, according to the narrator, by an artful delivery of speech that is mistaken for wit but is only a clever imitation of other people's words. Interestingly, the first exchange shared between Dorriforth and Miss Milner captures his wonder and inspires his comparison between father and daughter based presumably on Miss Milner's performative wit. The narrator offers few details on Mr. Milner's character, yet it is made known that Dorriforth and Mr. Milner both share a mutual respect of one another.

From the beginning of his guardianship duties, Dorriforth cautions and advises Miss Milner to spend her time in fruitful endeavors of reading, reflection, and cultivation of virtues; in response, Miss Milner portrays "looks and gesture of assent" and even speaks the "language of conviction", making her appear submissive to Dorriforth.<sup>75</sup> However, Miss Milner's reluctant obedience continued until the "first call of dissipation would [cause a] change to ill-timed raillery or peevish remonstrance" at the restrictions on her amusements.<sup>76</sup> When Miss Milner submits to Dorriforth's explicit demands, her sullen disposition and frequent tears reveal her inner thoughts and expose her excessive sensibility. The pairing of female deviance and sensibility was considered by society as a dangerous combination of flagrant sexuality, willful behavior, and excessive passion. Miss Milner's inner desire for control not only conflicts with the conventions of her sex but also with her verbal promise "ever to obey [Dorriforth] [. . .] as her father."<sup>77</sup> Miss Milner's façade of submissiveness readily contrasts with other members of her sex represented in Miss Woodley and Miss Fenton. Conversely, Miss Woodley eagerly

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<sup>75</sup> Inchbald 72.

<sup>76</sup> Inchbald 72.

<sup>77</sup> Inchbald 68.

acquiesces to commands and requests without speaking “one impertinent word” or by showing “one line of her face”<sup>78</sup>; yet, she does inwardly feel anguish at being restrained. Miss Fenton, upheld by Dorriforth as the “most perfect model for her sex”, likewise displays complete submissiveness to patriarchal demands, but the “continued placid form” of her physical features emanates from her “superior soul[,] [which] appeared above those natural commotions of the mind.”<sup>79</sup> Unlike Miss Fenton’s exceedingly dispassionate demeanor, Miss Woodley’s inner emotional conflict reveals the excruciating imprisonment of involuntary gender compliance. Rather than a critique of Miss Milner’s attempts of agency, Inchbald offers criticism of Miss Woodley’s extraordinary struggle to comply with a command that conflicted with her personal wishes. Miss Milner’s infrequent show of obedience and compliance to Dorriforth’s requests did not extend to other areas of her life where her notable beauty secured privileges and enabled the young woman of fortune to presume acceptance and admiration from those around her.

Miss Milner’s fashionable education ostensibly hinders her comprehension; however, while her gender identity results in inferior education, her femaleness ironically benefits her freedom of speech. The narrator explains that Miss Milner “as a woman [. . .] was privileged to say any thing [*sic*] that she pleased; and as a beautiful woman, she had a right to expect whatever she pleased to say, should be admired.”<sup>80</sup> The narrator’s hyperbolic statement seemingly contradicts the prevailing conduct book

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<sup>78</sup> Inchbald 82.

<sup>79</sup> Inchbald 88.

<sup>80</sup> Inchbald 90.

ideology that a woman should remain silent. This assertion radically conflicts with the reality that British women faced at the end of the eighteenth century. Haggerty contends, “Inchbald allows Miss Milner to exercise her female prerogative in order to demonstrate just how profound the limits to that power really are.”<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, Miss Milner’s quick, impulsive replies may be tolerated to some extent due to her immense beauty, yet the other female characters, Miss Fenton, Miss Woodley, and Matilda, however, are not extended this same privilege even though Miss Fenton and Matilda are described as emanating beauty as well. Nonetheless, these women choose their words carefully and thoughtfully presumably due to their proper education; however, the potential for power is available to them as well. The narrator’s description of female beauty also raises questions regarding the implications of gender. If, as the narrator presumes, a woman has the liberty to vocalize her opinion because of her gender, in question then are the reasons regarding why the female gender also conversely restricts women from classical and rational learning, restrains them from living independently, and inhibits them from a vocation in the public sphere. Despite this hyperbole regarding women’s verbal freedom, Miss Milner’s uninhibited speaking is often at issue with Dorriforth’s and Sandford’s conception of religion and feminine propriety.

Corresponding to the general pedagogical objective of fashionable education, Miss Milner acquires her knowledge of religion and other subjects through rote memorization (as was a common practice in boarding schools); yet she feels no sense of apprehension when engaging in arguments with Sandford. Quite similar to the character

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<sup>81</sup> Haggerty, George. *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998. Print. 41.

of the “improperly educated” woman, such as Hays’ Emma Courtney, Miss Milner does not hesitate to vocalize her views on important issues. Miss Milner, who “possessed a degree of spirit beyond the generality of her sex,” retorted “hostilities on all his [Sandford’s] arguments, his learning, and his favourite axioms.”<sup>82</sup> Sandford’s immediate repugnance of Miss Milner is evident in his frequent, pointed comments to the young woman. A common theme of their debates concerns the proper behavior of women, common temptations of the female sex, and appropriate female knowledge, and Sandford and Miss Milner entrench themselves in their respective beliefs and experiences. Despite Sandford’s disbelief of her intelligence, Miss Milner “proves herself Sandford’s intellectual equal, contesting his stereotypical misogynist notions at every turn and disproving his declaration”<sup>83</sup> of the inferiority of a woman’s mind. Unlike Emma Courtney who possesses a vast wealth of knowledge gained through assiduous study,<sup>84</sup> Miss Milner relies on her innate understanding and experiences to refute Sandford’s arguments and does not waiver in her efforts to maintain her own position.

Neither Sandford nor Miss Milner desires to relinquish control of Dorriforth as each one struggles to assert dominant power in the household. During the course of many disagreements between Miss Milner and Sandford, Dorriforth proposes a retreat to the country for the autumn season; Miss Milner graciously accepts this request yet makes it known that she has felt neglected of Dorriforth’s attention since the arrival of

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<sup>82</sup> Inchbald 91.

<sup>83</sup> Mortensen, Peter. “Rousseau’s English Daughters: Female Desire and Male Guardianship in British Romantic Fiction.” *English Studies* 4(2002): 356-70. Print. 363.

<sup>84</sup> I am referring to the title character in Mary Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796).

Miss Fenton and Sandford. She expresses her displeasure by casting an angry look to Sandford. In response to Miss Milner's slight, Sandford claims that because of "the variety of humours some women are exposed to, they cannot be steadfast even in deceit."<sup>85</sup> However, his intention to insult and embarrass Miss Milner is foiled by her spirited denial of deceitful conduct and emphatic assertion of her sincere dislike of him. The enmity between Sandford and Miss Milner creates tension in the house as Miss Milner refuses to remain silent to Sandford's provocations even though as a man and a Jesuit priest, his authoritative presence is clear. Her forceful rhetoric, strength of character, and independent will align her with the figure of the "improperly educated" woman and these qualities become hindrances in the two men's attempts to subdue the young woman.

Miss Milner's fashionable education, youth, and sex are blamed for her capriciousness, excessive sensibility, lack of self-control, and superficial morality. Her boarding school education has given her the knowledge and techniques to perform her gender to her advantage. In recognition of Miss Milner's power as a beautiful woman, Sandford seeks to abate it through the covenant of marriage; he advises Dorriforth that "a proper match should be immediately sought out for her, and the care of so dangerous a person given into other hands."<sup>86</sup> Undoubtedly, Sandford acts an antagonist to Miss Milner, whom he deems foolish and "incorrigible."<sup>87</sup> The two men fear the "danger" of Miss Milner's continued willfulness and independent spirit as her deviant conduct

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<sup>85</sup> Inchbald 93.

<sup>86</sup> Inchbald 92.

<sup>87</sup> Inchbald 92.



threatens the patriarchal rule of the household. Castle argues that Miss Milner and Dorriforth equally seek and desire “power and dominance; the only difference is that his narcissism is veiled by a mantle of patriarchal prestige. He assumes obedience as his unquestioned right”<sup>88</sup>; yet, Miss Milner must be compelled to abide by Dorriforth’s commands when in conflict with her own wishes. At times, Miss Milner’s amenability is motivated from the unlikely source of her dislike for Sandford and her satisfaction in vexing him.<sup>89</sup> Her active agency and independence of mind blurs the gender boundaries as she challenges Dorriforth’s masculine right for absolute control.

During the interval period of Miss Fenton’s mourning of her first betrothed, Lord Elmwood, and her engagement to Dorriforth who succeeded the title, Sandford once more broaches the subject of female nature, declaring that “there is as much difference between some women, as between good and evil spirits.”<sup>90</sup> Sandford unequivocally compares Miss Milner and Miss Fenton, who represent varied educations and exhibit disparate personalities and conducts, in terms of scripture in hopes of disparaging Miss Milner’s coquettish manner and beauty in the eyes of Lord Elmwood. Sandford continues his biblical rant against Miss Milner, declaring that “beauty [...] when endowed upon spirits that are evil, is a mark of their greater, their more extreme wickedness.—Lucifer was the most beautiful of all the angels in paradise.”<sup>91</sup> Miss Milner’s beauty, a physical asset that allegedly compels freedom of speech and demands admiration, also becomes a point of criticism and justification for Sandford’s harsh

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<sup>88</sup> Castle 307.

<sup>89</sup> Inchbald 94.

<sup>90</sup> Inchbald 154.

<sup>91</sup> Inchbald 154.

words. He equates her beauty with Lucifer's and implies that Miss Milner's physical appearance symbolizes her deception, wickedness, and rebelliousness. Sandford further compares Miss Milner and Satan by concluding that if Miss Milner were an angel, she would be best suited in "serpent's skin" rather than wings.<sup>92</sup> The underlying point of Sandford's analogy is clear: Miss Milner poses a threat to convention.

Furthermore, Miss Milner represents a mixed character, comparable to the "improperly educated" woman, who portrays neither complete evilness nor virtue but who continues to exceed established gender boundaries. The instances of Miss Milner's defense of women against Sandford's disparaging remarks and her individual autonomy are quickly forgotten as Miss Milner accepts Lord Elmwood's marriage proposal and enters into the prescribed role of wife and later mother. Vivien Jones argues that a "familiar critical account of eighteenth-century women and women's writing, whereby the period during which women became increasingly 'conspicuous' as writers was also the period during which 'the pressure towards respectability', the pressure to make their writing (and their behaviour more generally) conform to codes of feminine modesty was increasingly acutely felt."<sup>93</sup> As stated, many critics have concluded that the second half of the novel was Inchbald's tactical attempt to recompense for the transgressions of the first half; however, a closer examination of Matilda's prudent education reveals issues with the portrayal of ideal female education.

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<sup>92</sup> Inchbald 155.

<sup>93</sup> Jones Introduction 10.

### ***Proper Female Education Undefined***

It is clear that Matilda's story is fraught with irony in regards to her education and domestic situation. First, though the young, virtuous heroine is properly educated "with an excellent understanding [and] a sedateness above her years,"<sup>94</sup> she possesses no self-reflective skills and her erudition provides no comfort or deeper understanding of the misfortune that plagues her. Second, she lives in social isolation despite being neither a fallen woman or of deviant character. Third, notwithstanding Matilda's mind and manners resembling Lord Elmwood's, Matilda's "extreme tenderness of her heart"<sup>95</sup> becomes the compelling force in her life. Her personal identity is ironically based upon the absence of her mother and father as well as the lack of social interaction and experiences apart from her small, confined world. Furthermore, Matilda suffers the loss of her parents, the death of her mother and the banishment from her father, yet her physical and mental likeness to her mother and father is undeniable. Matilda's "person, shape, and complexion [*sic*] were so extremely like what her mother's once were, that at the first glance she appeared to have a still greater resemblance of her, than of her father—but her mind and manners were all Lord Elmwood's; softened by the delicacy of her sex, the extreme tenderness of her heart, and the melancholy of her situation."<sup>96</sup> On the one hand, the providential unification of the mother's beauty and the father's intelligence, an embodiment of the distinguishing characteristic of each sex, within the daughter may perhaps represent a negotiation of the dichotomy between the sexes. On

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<sup>94</sup> Inchbald 240.

<sup>95</sup> Inchbald 244.

<sup>96</sup> Inchbald 244.

the other hand, this combination of sexual attributes may merely serve as an illustration of Alexander Pope's claim, in "An Epistle to a Lady" (1743), that an ideal woman is simply a feminized man: "Woman's at best a Contradiction still. / Heav'n, when it strives to polish all it can / Its last best work, but forms a softer Man."<sup>97</sup> In an effort to remove any power from the female sex derived from gender perfection, Pope makes an oblique effort to bestow gratuitous praise on the male sex. In response, Macaulay boldly transforms Pope's description, saying "a perfect man is a woman formed after a coarser mold", thus reclaiming female authority for their sex.<sup>98</sup> However, Inchbald seemingly responds differently than Macaulay by presenting her proper heroine as a subdued adaptation of a male's mind.

Although the narrator portrays Matilda as an ideal representative of the female sex, it is interesting to note the differences between Matilda's proper gender performance and Miss Fenton's ideal femininity. In volume one, the narrator introduces Miss Fenton, who is described as the "most perfect model for her sex"<sup>99</sup>; her behavior is considered by Dorriforth and Sandford as indicative of female excellence and is frequently praised. Miss Fenton's perfection seems derived solely from her feminine graces and virtuous behavior while the idealism surrounding Matilda is based on the amalgamation of masculine and feminine features. Of course, Miss Fenton's inability to express emotion due to her "serenity of mind[,] which kept her features in a continual

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<sup>97</sup> Pope, Alexander. "Of the Characters of Women: An Epistle to a Lady." London: J. Wright. 1735. 14. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. Web. 1 December 2011.

<sup>98</sup> Macaulay 204.

<sup>99</sup> Inchbald 88.

placid form”<sup>100</sup> becomes a divisive factor in comparison with Matilda’s keen sensibility and communicative countenance. Miss Fenton’s idealistic propriety and apparent superiority to “natural commotions of the mind”<sup>101</sup> positions her at the extreme end of the continuum of female education and behavior; yet, this untenable position of perfection cannot exist in the world and Miss Fenton ultimately departs to a convent. Matilda’s portrayal of femininity is nonetheless idealistic; however, her propriety seems more realistic in contrast with Miss Fenton.

Although representative of the ideal balance between genders, Matilda wields no power through her outward beauty, as her mother had done, and she employs her “masculine” mind in matters of sentimentality rather than in rational pursuits. Mónica Bolufer Peruga states the “in contrast to men who tended to stress the utilitarian side of women’s education (educating women to be responsible wives and mothers, or polite participants in elite society)[,] women writers tended to value learning as a route to emotional and intellectual autonomy, a path to self-esteem and the pleasures of solitary reflection. . . .”<sup>102</sup> Matilda’s learning is quite unlike the erudition gained by the “improperly educated” female character, who benefits from both knowledge and independence of mind; rather, Matilda’s education provides no means of use. Inchbald’s concern for female education seems to dominate the novel, but specific details regarding the educations of any of the female characters are few. Ironically, the narrator omits any

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<sup>100</sup> Inchbald 88.

<sup>101</sup> Inchbald 88.

<sup>102</sup> Peruga, Mónica Bolufer. “Introduction to Section 4: Gender and the Reasoning Mind.” *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*. Ed. Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 189-194. Print. 191.

comprehensive view of Matilda's studies despite the recurring acclaim. The narrator explains that Matilda who had been

educated in the school adversity, and inured to retirement from her infancy, [. . .] had acquired a taste for all those amusements which a recluse life affords—She was fond of walking and riding—was accomplished in the arts of music and drawing, by the most careful instructions of her mother—and as a scholar she excelled most of her sex, from the great pains Sandford had taken with that part of her education, and the great abilities he possessed for the task. In devoting certain hours of the day to study with him, others to music, riding, and such recreations, Matilda's time never appeared tedious at Elmwood House, although she neither received nor paid one visit.<sup>103</sup>

As the male version of ideal femininity, Matilda is a clear representation of the paradox of proper female education: instruction without application and classical learning without reflection. Katharine M. Rogers deciphers Matilda's representation of proper education to denote "her cheerless childhood, [. . .] which inhibited her from developing her mother's will and passion."<sup>104</sup> Rogers astutely observes that "Matilda's rational self-control is indistinguishable from the dutiful self-suppression that eighteenth-century convention prescribed for women."<sup>105</sup> Matilda's self-discipline does not appear to be the result of self-reflection and exercising her reason; rather, it seems that social custom and

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<sup>103</sup> Inchbald 244-45.

<sup>104</sup> Rogers 86.

<sup>105</sup> Rogers 86.

filial obligation compel Matilda's repression of her individual voice, volition, and sexuality.

Although the narrator describes Matilda's mind like her father's yet tempered by her gender, Matilda's reasoning is often undermined by powerful emotions of fear, grief, and dejection. Matilda's "excellent understanding"<sup>106</sup> is frequently governed by her unquestioning obedience of her father's authoritative commands and her promise to her mother that she would "submit with patience"<sup>107</sup> no matter her fate. She does not rely on her bookish learning to inform her views or to direct her actions, which is in consequence in part to her faultless behavior; moreover, any logical thought process is distorted by her emotional desires. Matilda's actions affirm that "a morally-improving education by itself, then, does not guarantee fortitude and independence of mind."<sup>108</sup> Fearful of impropriety, Matilda denies herself the opportunity to inquire about her father until reassured by Sandford that "it is always proper [. . .] for *you* to think of him, though he should never think on you."<sup>109</sup> Matilda frequently mistrusts her own reasoning and many times it is overpowered by her feelings of awe and fear of her father, who becomes the focal point of her isolated existence. She expresses incredulity at Sandford's confirmation of her father's granting her mother's request and even "though from her reason Matilda could not doubt of any mistake from Mr. Sandford, yet her fears

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<sup>106</sup> Inchbald 240.

<sup>107</sup> Inchbald 241.

<sup>108</sup> Bray, Joe. *The Female Reader in the English Novel: From Burney to Austen*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Print. 87.

<sup>109</sup> Inchbald 241.

suggested a thousand scruples.”<sup>110</sup> Reflective of many young women’s access to knowledge, Matilda must depend on others to gain information; furthermore, she has no other recourse than to accept Sandford’s and Miss Woodley’s interpretations of her father’s actions and the possible meanings behind his erratic moods.

When Sandford reveals his suspicion that Lord Elmwood’s uplifted spirits were due in part to Matilda’s proximity, Matilda becomes overwhelmed with joy and confesses to Sandford that “If he does but think of me with tenderness [. . .] I am recompensed.”<sup>111</sup> When Sandford calls attention to the flaw in Matilda’s statement that Lord Elmwood’s kind thoughts, which cannot yet be proven, would not be compensation enough if he were to relinquish his protection of her, Matilda replies that it would mean “a great deal [to her].”<sup>112</sup> Sandford challenges this reply by emphasizing the lack of proof that Lord Elmwood bestows kind thoughts on his daughter, but Matilda disagrees based on the unfounded supposition that “we could know them [his kind thoughts] without the proof.”<sup>113</sup> Sandford quickly points out the impossibility of this knowledge without proof; in response, “Matilda looked deeply concerned that the argument should conclude in her disappointment; for to have believed herself thought of with tenderness by her father, would have alone constituted her happiness.”<sup>114</sup> Her thinking becomes irrational as she tries to construe her father’s actions and moods as indicative of his consideration and positive feelings towards herself. Despite Matilda’s scholarly study

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<sup>110</sup> Inchbald 246.

<sup>111</sup> Inchbald 248.

<sup>112</sup> Inchbald 248.

<sup>113</sup> Inchbald 248.

<sup>114</sup> Inchbald 248-9.



under the direction of Sandford, Matilda receives little opportunity to exercise her critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Gary Kelly believes that Matilda's education "has given her the intellectual resources that Miss Milner, for all her fashionable accomplishments, fatally lacked. The contrast, if simple and direct, is founded on the difference of education, and therefore argues rather than states the moral."<sup>115</sup> However, I contend that evidence of Matilda's "intellectual resources" is sorely lacking in the novel and that the differences in the two women's educations reveal the inferiority of the entire system of female education as opposed to supporting the argument of morality. Furthermore, Miss Milner's innate intellect appears more valuable in spite of her frivolous education in contrast with Matilda's proper instruction that fails to provide a foundation for any profound thinking.

It is clear that neither Matilda's proper education nor excellent understanding influence her thoughts concerning her father, and due to her isolated upbringing, she possesses no personal experiences nor any external influences to aid in her reasoning capabilities. Flawless, nearly to a similar degree as Miss Fenton, Matilda permits others to exert their authority over her. The absence of any direct reference to specific texts, authors, historical events, literary figures, or biblical scriptures seems peculiar in regards to a model of proper education within a novel of education. Joe Bray observes, "Matilda, though capable of exercising self-control, does not seem to be able to use her reading sufficiently to sustain her in her 'lonely retreat.' There are few references to her reading,

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<sup>115</sup> Kelly 91.

or [Matilda] remembering her reading.”<sup>116</sup> In contrast, the character of Emma Courtney in Hay’s *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* regularly refers to authors she has read and recites certain scenes or lines in literary texts as evidence to support her viewpoints. Emma shows active engagement with her reading and makes clear her influences and sources of knowledge while Matilda fails to illustrate her learning in a direct manner. The narrator’s references to Matilda’s understanding inevitably are founded upon her goodwill and modesty rather than any knowledge acquired from scholarly study.

Even though commonly read through a conventional lens, this novel of education provides little palpable proof of how a female should be properly educated. The narrator simply states that Matilda possesses excellent understanding and surpassed most of her sex as a scholar, but the narrator evades any obligation to describe her scholarly studies or to substantiate her intelligence. The narrator assures the reader that Sandford had taken “great pains [. . .] with that part [scholarly studies] of her education, and the great abilities he possessed for the task.”<sup>117</sup> In consideration of eighteenth-century educational treatises and educational history, Michèle Cohen reveals that rather than the importance of the subjects taught to females, the objective was “avoiding depth. The girls’ curriculum was woven into assertions about women’s lack of ‘intellectual strength’ and their incapacity to ‘penetrate into the abstruser [*sic*] walks of literature.’”<sup>118</sup> If Cohen’s claim is applied to *A Simple Story*, then the profundity of Matilda’s scholarly studies

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<sup>116</sup> Bray 87.

<sup>117</sup> Inchbald 245.

<sup>118</sup> Cohen, Michèle. “‘A Little Learning’? The Curriculum and the Construction of Gender Difference in the Long Eighteenth Century.” *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29 (2006): 321-35. Print. 329.

continues to be questionable since the specific subjects would not be at issue but the intellectual depth of the material studied. Matilda receives her education through a traditional mentor and student relationship, where the male educator guides the student through proper channels of learning. This supervised instructional method ensures that the young person does not depend upon her own discretion. However, her learning is never tested or put to use in a constructive manner. Matilda does not converse with Sandford in the same manner as her mother had once done nor do Matilda and Sandford ever discuss matters of significance apart from her forlorn situation. Her erudition becomes simply another accomplishment added to her repertoire as a young woman of privileged birth. Caroline Breashears notes that Matilda's "much-touted education does little to restore her to her father. It takes the intervention of another man to do that. . . ."<sup>119</sup> The lack of evidence of Matilda's rationality or social usefulness exposes the profound constraints of female education.

Seemingly, neither a proper education nor boarding-school instruction provided females with a broad base of knowledge. When discussing Matilda's level of understanding, the narrator does not allude to her book learning but references her comprehension of Miss Woodley's and Sandford's unconcealed feelings of resentment towards Rushbrook. The narrator explains, "Matilda had the understanding to imagine, she was, perhaps, the object who had thus deformed Mr. Rushbrook" in the minds of her companions, which seems to require little discernment due to the fact that neither

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<sup>119</sup> Breashears, Caroline. "Defining Masculinity in *A Simple Story*." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16.3 (2004): 451-70. Print. 468.

companion attempts to mask his/her dislike.<sup>120</sup> Lord Margrave, upon first meeting Matilda, describes Matilda as possessing “so much modesty and dignity [. . .][and] so much good will”<sup>121</sup>; consequently, none of his skills in seduction could “affect a heart appendant [*sic*] to such a mind as Matilda’s,”<sup>122</sup> who detests the unsolicited attentions of men. Although her character is meant to be the converse of her fashionable mother, Lady Elmwood, Matilda’s strong denial of Lord Margrave’s advances is an isolated incident, and she has no knowledge of the world. In this respect, Matilda is quite similar to Fanny Burney’s Evelina, who also spent her childhood in retirement, educated by an elderly, non-related gentleman, and unaware of the complexities of the world; however, while Evelina is given the chance to enter into society and gain experience with other people, Matilda continues in isolation and no expansion of her small world into society seems probable. Matilda’s ostensible advantage of perfection does not evenly correspond to her mother’s past behavior due to her innocence of the world. While Sandford found many flaws in Miss Milner’s character and conduct, “he seldom found fault with Lady Matilda; not because he loved her, but because she seldom did wrong.”<sup>123</sup> Matilda rarely errs because she is given no opportunity to make her own decisions or experience life without the watchful eyes of Sandford and Miss Woodley. Evelina, who is considered to be properly educated, makes many mistakes due to her ignorance of the world, but she experiences it nonetheless. Matilda’s ideal education and isolated existence fails to prepare her for life outside of the confines of her father’s house; however, Matilda

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<sup>120</sup> Inchbald 253.

<sup>121</sup> Inchbald 267.

<sup>122</sup> Inchbald 268.

<sup>123</sup> Inchbald 282.

“struggles against passivity” and though her efforts prove impotent, she yearns for agency.<sup>124</sup>

Due to Matilda’s education in the “school of prudence—though of adversity”, her sensibility overpowers the rational part of her mind.<sup>125</sup> In her review of *A Simple Story*, Mary Wollstonecraft commented on the sentimentality of Matilda, arguing that she “should have possessed greater dignity of mind. Educated in adversity[,] she should have learned (to prove that a cultivated mind is a real advantage) how to bear, nay, rise above her misfortunes, instead of suffering her health to be undermined by the trials of her patience, which ought to have strengthened her understanding.”<sup>126</sup> Wollstonecraft’s assessment of Matilda emphasizes the failure of education as well as questions the efficacy of Matilda’s cultivated mind. It seems apparent that Matilda has no recourse in her learning and knowledge to lessen her grief and provide some comfort in shared misfortunes with figures from history or literature. Although her mental development occurs through hardship, Matilda’s fortitude falters under the immense pain of the fulfillment of her father’s conditional protection. During the period of her exile, Rushbrook visits Matilda to find her severely altered in appearance, and Matilda confesses to him, “I am frequently so weak I cannot resist the smallest incitement to grief.”<sup>127</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks notes that *A Simple Story* “demonstrates, as few of the decade’s [1790s] other novels do, the costs of harmonizing rationality and emotion,

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<sup>124</sup> Ward 15.

<sup>125</sup> Inchbald, 342.

<sup>126</sup> Wollstonecraft, Mary. Review of *A Simple Story*. *Analytical Review* 10 (May 1791): 101-02. Rpt. in *A Simple Story*. Ed. Anna Lott. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2007. Print. 381.

<sup>127</sup> Inchbald 320.

‘masculine’ power and ‘feminine’ sympathy” and concludes the difficulty for reconciliation of this dichotomous association.<sup>128</sup> The unification of this dichotomy within the character of Matilda underscores the immense challenge to resolve the socially-ingrained gender stereotypes that are reflected in the opposing systems of education. Powerful emotions of anguish, apprehension, and resentment consistently dominate Matilda’s mind despite her rationality, submissiveness, and dutiful conduct. Unlike Miss Fenton whose mind is emotionally unfettered, Matilda keenly feels the misfortune of her situation. While Matilda’s mind is similarly formed to her father’s and her sentimentality is expressed in a manner resembling her mother, Matilda’s mind and emotions remain in contention. She does not attempt to reconcile rationality and sensibility in a concerted effort because her education and social hierarchy inhibits a successful reconciliation of her masculine mind and feminine sensibility.

### ***Conclusion***

Classified as a novel of education, Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* offers a glimpse at the opposing ends of the spectrum of female education. In an ostensive manner, Miss Milner and Matilda respectively model the defectiveness of conventional education, and both heroines share the misfortune of the continuation of gender-restrictive learning. The narrator’s predilection to the education and behavior of proper characters of Miss Woodley, Miss Fenton, and Matilda should not necessarily be understood as Inchbald’s tacit approval of the limitations of a domestic and virtuous education. Rather, as I have argued, despite the fallen state of Lady Elmwood and the stated moral of the constructive

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<sup>128</sup> Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *Desire and Truth: Functions of Plot in Eighteenth-Century English Novels*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990. Print. 195.

benefits of a proper education, this novel challenges the assumption that females are incapable of inhabiting a state of equilibrium between obligations of social custom and their own subjectivity. The “improperly educated” female character is not fully manifested in Inchbald’s novel, yet the idea of a balanced female education and independent female character remains just below the surface of the narrative. Published in the early stages of the 1790s debate on education, this novel demonstrates the need for a state of equilibrium between masculine rationality and classical learning and feminine domesticity and sensibility in female education.

In volume one, the narrator states, “Education, is called second nature”<sup>129</sup>; accordingly, this statement proves to be true as Miss Milner, Miss Woodley, and Matilda unconsciously absorb the gender restrictions inherent in the current system of female education. Inchbald’s novel attests to the growing concerns of women writers who viewed the weaknesses attributed to their sex as indicative of faulty education rather than an inferior nature. Correspondingly, *A Simple Story* prompts female readers to question the actual beneficence to the current instruction given to young girls. Although Inchbald cannot ultimately provide a resolution to the disparities of masculine and feminine education, she does succeed in providing an informed view of the deficiencies inherent in the system of female education.

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<sup>129</sup> Inchbald 118.

CHAPTER III  
EMPOWERMENT OF THE “IMPROPERLY EDUCATED” WOMAN IN *MEMOIRS*  
*OF EMMA COURTNEY*

This chapter will consider the ways in which eighteenth-century British writer Mary Hays challenged the cultural and social conception of the “naturally feminine,” proper woman through her unconventional placement of a type of deviant female character, the “improperly educated” woman, in the role of heroine in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796).<sup>130</sup> The ironic portrayal of female “miseducation,” signifying rational and classical learning, independence of thought, and critical thinking skills, provided a severe critique of the superficial and oppressive nature of the female education system. Her studies are typically devoted to history, philosophy, science, languages, theology, and classical texts via self-teaching or a parent’s guidance, an education that is directly opposite to the typical female education, which focused on rote learning and fashionable accomplishments, such as singing, sewing, and drawing. Generally, self-education was thought to be quite dangerous for young females during the late eighteenth century, and it was commonly agreed that a young woman could place herself in a precarious position by knowing too much or too little according to social and gender rules. Peruga explains that informal learning for women “was discouraged as conducive to anarchic, superficial learning and, implicitly, as encouraging a degree of personal initiative and intellectual

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<sup>130</sup> The subsequent references throughout the chapter will refer to *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* as *Emma Courtney*.



ambition improper for their sex.”<sup>131</sup> This accepted belief of the weakness of the female sex permeated throughout British culture and society and unsupervised learning was thought to exacerbate the frivolity of the female mind. A moral and proper education, taught by a parent, was considered to be ideal since boarding schools were widely believed to be inferior in teaching and to foster lascivious behavior. Some women writers, however, challenged the social prejudice regarding alternative methods of learning and illustrated the benefits of a diverse education.

My argument offers a slightly varied reading of the representation of the type of deviant female character, which I describe as the “improperly educated” woman, in Hays’ *Emma Courtney*. I argue that Hays enabled her heroine Emma Courtney to represent the female sex’s ability and desire for intellectuality and to show the negative effects of the social position of woman, who is neither ideal nor monstrous. Disregarding the autobiographical links between Hays’ real life and the novel, it is important to evaluate Emma as a fictional literary character who functions within the text separately from the author’s person. Some critics including Eleanor Ty, Anjana Sharma, Joe Bray, Claire Grogan, among others, have allowed the autobiographical links between Hays’ real-life tumultuous heterosexual relationship and her life being an educated woman to dominate their analyses and undermine the perceived literary depth of *Emma Courtney*. The ineffective reduction of Hays as Emma, based on the use of actual letters from Hays to William Frend and between Hays and William Godwin is not an adequate critique;

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<sup>131</sup> Peruga 192.

instead, it is only a continuation of eighteenth-century reviews, which promptly disdained the novel's unconventionality and shocking content.

My argument opposes the many comparisons between the writing of Hays and her mentor and friend Mary Wollstonecraft, and my aim in this chapter is to demonstrate that Hays' text should not be subordinated to Wollstonecraft's two novels, *Mary: A Fiction* (1788) and *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) or considered as simply an echo of Wollstonecraft's earlier writing. However, I would like to observe that Emma's passionate, sensitive being; her various attempts to use both passion and reason to sway an obstinate lover; and the coldness between her and her father as well as a number of other similarities closely correspond to Wollstonecraft's own experiences and behavior with men, her antipathy towards her father's treatment of her and her mother, and her upbringing. It has been frequently documented that Hays drew from incidents in her own life, and the circumstances involving her and Frenn have been identified as the main source for this text. Nevertheless, as Janet Todd notes in her biography on Wollstonecraft, both Hays and Wollstonecraft shared similar stories in their unsuccessful romantic encounters with the opposite sex,<sup>132</sup> and as close friends, Wollstonecraft would have confided in Hays regarding intimate details of her past. The many similarities between Emma and Wollstonecraft present an intriguing aspect to the large body of scholarship that has claimed that Hays re-created her life into a self-rewarding fantasy

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<sup>132</sup> Todd, Janet. *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Revolutionary Life*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print. 373-75.

and has subordinated Hays as a follower of Wollstonecraft's feminism therefore depriving her of the critical praise she deserved.

Many notable critics, Ty, Louise Joy, Katherine Binhammer, and Tilottama Rajan, have each respectively published critical studies on Hays' *Emma Courtney* discussing Emma's unique narrative voice, her use of the language of sensibility, her philosophical debates on individuality and social reform, and her support of female education. My chapter continues the scholarly focus on the representation of female education in *Emma Courtney* through my analysis of the ironic display of Emma's "improper" education, which indicts the deficient educational system. I position my argument within the growing body of scholarship on women writers and the novel in the 1790s within the field of feminist literary history. Todd's *The Sign of Angellica*; Gary Kelly's *Women, Writing, and Revolution*; and Eve Tavor Bannet's *Domestic Revolution* have all greatly contributed to the study of liberal and radical women writers' critique of political, social, education, and economic issues plaguing women at the end of the eighteenth century. While past scholars, Todd, Ty, Rajan, Joy, Harriet Guest, and Anjana Sharma, have discussed Emma's sexual aggressive behavior, her privileging of sensibility with reason, her appropriation of masculine philosophy for feminist ends, and her "incomplete education,"<sup>133</sup> they have not fully evaluated Emma as representative of a new type of education. Although Emma portrays characteristics of the fallen woman, she is not the typical deviant woman, as Todd points out in *Sign of Angellica*. Overall, Emma's education, actions, and beliefs are considered indicative of the sexual and

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<sup>133</sup> Sharma, Anjana. "A Different Voice: Mary Hays's *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney*." *Women's Writing* 8.1 (2001): 139-67. Print. 161.

gender repression suffered by females; of course, this viewpoint has validity and is an important part of the novel, but it is not the only evaluation. As my argument shows, Emma's education, intellectualism, and ambition are positive reinforcements to the intellectual capabilities of the female sex. Conversely, Nicola Watson and Sharma each view the text as ultimately a failure due to what they perceive as Hays' inability to prevail over the masculine novelistic paradigm as seen in Samuel Richardson's novels and to avoid being reduced as an "erring sentimental heroine."<sup>134</sup> *Emma Courtney* should arguably be evaluated as a singular success in the movement for female educational reform and women's equality due to its progressive examination of instructional practices through the role of an unconventional character, the "improperly educated" woman, to show the enduring effects of gender-based education.

One of *Emma Courtney's* central themes is the coexistence of rationality and passion, which is displayed as fundamental to the construction of female education and offers a positive portrayal of female identity. Patricia M. Spacks states that at the close of the eighteenth century, reason and passion were viewed as interconnected within the novel, as writers "passionately pursue[d] a set of reasoned convictions about the immediate state of society";<sup>135</sup> however, in relation to the female sex, this principle was not considered to be true. Hays examined this strict, conventional separation of reason and passion through her heroine's maturation and life experiences. Emma rejects the assertion that sensibility and logic cannot coexist and posits that reason and passion are

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<sup>134</sup> Watson, Nicola J. *Revolution and the Form of the British Novel, 1790-1825: Intercepted Letters, Interrupted Seductions*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. Print. 23.

<sup>135</sup> Spacks, Patricia M. "How We See: The 1790s." *Enlightening Romanticism, Romancing the Enlightenment: British Novels from 1750 to 1832*. Ed. Miriam L. Wallace. Burlington: Ashgate, 2009. 179-88. Print. 183.

both un-gendered.<sup>136</sup> She represents Hays' efforts to unite and balance rational and emotional characteristics in the figure of the "improperly educated" woman. By presenting "an alternative feminine logic largely based on the sensibility she has been educated to embrace, Emma attempts to break through, what is to her, a barrier built up on uncompromising, and often inconsistent, rationality,"<sup>137</sup> which is exploited to the advantage of the male sex. Through the focus on the traditional dichotomy of reason and passion as characteristically indicative of the sexes, Hays exposed the gender distinctions created by society to privilege the male sex and offered an alternative to female readers.

In *Emma Courtney*, Hays also responded to earlier novels written by eighteenth-century women writers Eliza Haywood, Frances Burney, and Elizabeth Inchbald. Similar to these women novelists, Hays responds to the predetermined stereotypes of the female character as either the ideal, domestic woman or the fallen, disgraced woman. These women writers exerted authoritative voices to their female readership by conceptualizing femininity, domesticity, social status, and education through their female perspective; furthermore, they used their novels to provide a satirical examination of the social stipulations for acceptable female behavior and to propose improvements in the treatment of women. Each writer constructed her own female characters who resisted, to varying extents, the established character types of Pamela, Clarissa, and Sophie,<sup>138</sup> but

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<sup>136</sup> Joy, Louise. "Novel Feelings: Emma Courtney's Point of View." *European Romantic Review*. 21 (2010): 221-34. Print. 227.

<sup>137</sup> Brooks 28.

<sup>138</sup> I am referring to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile, or On Education* (1762).

Hays attempted to go a step further to create one female character that was not only a culmination of female types but also a direct challenge to these categories as well. In *Emma Courtney*, Hays authenticates an “improperly educated” heroine who embraces her sexuality, intellectual ambition, and sensibility and strives to utilize these qualities in a constructive manner.

While the “improperly educated” woman has had exposure to instruction on proper femininity, specifically the emphasis on dress and polite conduct, her interests and energies are typically dedicated to studious endeavors. Hays provides her own distinguishing version of this female character through Emma’s displays of impressive erudition but also her reliance on her own experience to inform her understanding. Emma embodies Hays’ description that “free thinking and free speaking are the virtue and the characteristics of a rational being.”<sup>139</sup> Notably, the deviant characterization of the miseducated woman derives from her masculine learning and appropriation of masculine traits of aggression and agency. The character of Emma is flawed and “an amalgam of contradictory elements”<sup>140</sup> of sexual desire, rational understanding, rebelliousness of proper decorum, and candidness of her opinions. Her experiences and struggles offer realism to the female protagonist that had seemingly been lacking in preceding domestic novels. Redefining the figure of woman as intelligent and capable, Hays denies the premise that women demonstrate only sensibility and lack reasoning faculties. In relation to the education continuum, Emma oscillates between the point of

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<sup>139</sup> Hays, Mary. *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. 1796. Ed. Marilyn L. Brooks. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2000. Print. 36.

<sup>140</sup> Sharma 154.

equilibrium between rationality and sensibility to the extremity of female deviance and feminine impropriety; despite her failure to maintain this balance, Emma proves that the amalgamation of these gendered traits is possible. As the “improperly educated” woman, Emma functions as a device to satirize the conventionally ideal woman and to portray the irony of an education that does not enlighten but restricts and censors.

*Emma Courtney* further critiques the education system as an instrument used in British society to maintain the established gender boundaries that severely limit the identity and contributions of the female sex. The novel also addresses the paradoxical nature of female education: by fostering excessive sensibility, it thereby exposes and subjects females to social censure. As the “improperly educated” woman, Emma is an atypical heroine, who is outspoken, sexual, intelligent, and passionate. Miriam L. Wallace describes Emma as “a working model, not an ideal and fixed star as are many of the heroines and heroes of sentimental and English-Jacobin literature.”<sup>141</sup> Emma, who occupies the positions of narrator, protagonist, and deviant female character, represents an alternative to ideal femininity, but she is not simply an inversion of a proper female character. Emma gains control through reconstructing her life in a narrative to her adopted son and possesses the authority to interpret and analyze her actions from a mature standpoint. Emma’s agency, assertiveness, and appropriation of masculine language defy the idealistic woman figure.

Spacks argues that literary critics, contemporary with Hays, “noted the moral dangers” for female audiences “of encountering ‘mixed’ characters, neither dependably

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<sup>141</sup> Wallace, Miriam L. *Revolutionary Subjects in the English "Jacobin" Novel, 1790-1805*. Cranbury: Bucknell UP, 2009. Print. 72.

virtuous nor entirely evil.”<sup>142</sup> Opponents of novel reading felt that the typical female reader would fail to recognize the character’s transgressive behavior and be more likely to imitate the mixed character. Typically, deviant women “are presented [in writing]—licentious *and* learned, learned *and* courageous, courageous *and* cross-dressing, temporarily cross-dressing *and yet* family-oriented—violations of female-gender assumptions as fascinating.”<sup>143</sup> The mixed character of the “improperly educated” woman posed a threat to gender stability as she is neither an ideal version of femininity nor is she the typical ruined woman of the narrative. The “improperly educated” woman represented the shift in gender identity as the feminine woman is replaced by the free-thinking female.

***(Mis)Reading: Improper Education***

In response to the deficient educational offerings, many young females pursued their own course of study through borrowing books from the circulating library or a father’s private collection, as in Emma’s case. Emma’s inquisitiveness and the intermittent periods of self-directed studying are both considered improper by the larger eighteenth-century society. The lack of a systematic structure of Emma’s education is due in part to the death of her mother and her father’s initial lack of concern for the wellbeing of his daughter. Consequently, Emma’s ensuing education is administered by several persons with varying objectives and is atypically broad in scope. For instance, Mrs. Melmoth, her maternal aunt, teaches her religion and basic reading and writing skills while Mr. Melmoth, her maternal uncle, encourages her reading of literature.

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<sup>142</sup> Spacks “How We See” 184.

<sup>143</sup> Czennia 243.



Commanded by her father, Emma attends a boarding school for two years where the school mistresses attempt to instruct her in languages, music, sewing, and other similar feminine accomplishments. Surprisingly, it is her father who first introduces her to “masculine learning” by intervening in and contributing to Emma’s schooling to a certain extent. While Emma’s early education fostered her enjoyment of literature and fueled her creativity and imagination, Emma’s course of reading under her father’s direction introduces her to classical Grecian and Roman rhetoricians and philosophers, history of ancient times, theology, and metaphysics. Mr. Courtney desired to “prepare and strengthen [Emma’s] mind to encounter, with fortitude, some hardships and rude shocks”<sup>144</sup> that she would mostly face as a young woman with a small fortune. Although her father intermittently suggests useful books and offers “occasional remarks and reflections”,<sup>145</sup> Emma, for the most part, directs her reading and study according to texts that interest her in her father’s library. The reading process plays a significant role in female education as Emma gains knowledge of various “masculine” subjects, such as philosophy, theology, history, and science, and acquires a more comprehensive view of antiquity and British society and culture. Emma’s personal observations, experience, and reading aid in her intellectual explorations and philosophical inquiries of gender inequality in society.

Emma’s observations of political, philosophical, literary, and social discussions at her father’s dinner table afford her the opportunities to ponder and reflect on an array

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<sup>144</sup> Hays 53.

<sup>145</sup> Hays 54.

of meaningful subjects and philosophical inquiries.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, through independent study of theology and ecclesiastical history, Emma gains valuable knowledge and critical skills: “my mind began to be emancipated, doubts had been suggested to it, I reasoned freely, endeavoured [*sic*] to arrange and methodize my opinions, and to trace them fearlessly through all their consequences: while from exercising my thoughts with freedom, I seemed to acquire new strength and dignity of character.”<sup>147</sup> Emma benefits from the educational freedom to choose her reading material, to problem-solve, and to develop her own views on subjects. Despite the lack of supervised instruction, Emma utilizes reasoning and reflection to resolve her doubts and questions raised by the theological texts. Although frowned upon by society and education protocol, Emma greatly benefits by this type of challenge. Her manner of reading supports critical reading “without excessive emphasis on the self, yet with a proper degree of feeling and introspection”<sup>148</sup> and provides the knowledge to evaluate texts based on her discernment. Emma’s developing critical thinking and reading skills equip her with the necessary tools to construct reasonable judgments and decisions.

Although other characters within the text disapprove of reading novels, Katherine Binhammer argues, by and large, *Emma Courtney* does not project upon its heroine the belief that this genre is inherently dangerous to females or that unsupervised reading leads to seduction and sexual transgression.<sup>149</sup> The eighteenth-century educational

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<sup>146</sup> Hays 59.

<sup>147</sup> Hays 59-60.

<sup>148</sup> Bray 81.

<sup>149</sup> Binhammer, Katherine. “The Persistence of Reading: Governing Female Novel-Reading in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*.” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 27.2 (2003): 1-22. Print.

system was consequently considered by many women<sup>150</sup> as insufficient to produce critical and discerning readers, thus disabling young women to gain full comprehension. It is presented throughout *Emma Courtney* that the female reader should be capable of distinguishing fictional plots from her own reality. As a type of foreshadowing of future events, both her father Mr. Courtney and her aunt Mrs. Melmoth respectively attempt to equip Emma with the necessary education and personal level-headedness to handle life as a single, adult woman. However, their untimely deaths force Emma to leave the comfort of her aunt's home and expose her to the cruelty of the world. Despite Emma's avidity to reading novels, she quickly recognizes the distinction between the actual and imaginative as she contemplates her future on her own: "I shrunk from the world I had been so willing to enter, for the rude storms of which I had been little fitted by the fostering tenderness of my early guardians. Those ardent feelings and lively expectations, with all the glowing landscapes which my mind had sketched of the varied pleasures of society [ . . . ] gradually melted into one deep, undistinguished shade."<sup>151</sup> Her capability to distinguish between fiction and reality and have the strength to come to terms with her circumstances should be credited to her unconventional education. Although Emma blames her perusal of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* for her romanticized perception of a desirable man, it is Emma's sheltered childhood that primarily fosters her ingenuousness and her imaginative conception of the world.

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<sup>150</sup> Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Elizabeth Hamilton, and others viewed female education as lacking in necessary critical instruction.

<sup>151</sup> Hays 66.

Hays makes clear in the preface to *Emma Courtney* that it was a common practice in fiction to display characters “not as they really exist, but, as, we are told, they ought to be – a sort of ideal perfection, in which nature and passion are melted away, and jarring attributes wonderfully combined.”<sup>152</sup> The circulation of popular conduct books beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, such as James Fordyce’s *Sermons for Young Women* (1766) and John Gregory’s *Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1774), strengthened the growing conservatism regarding a strict mode of learning as suitable for females; supported the traditional societal hierarchy; and propagated the belief that females, who were innately subordinate to males, should be taught according to their “nature.” Gregory warns his daughters that learning should be kept a “profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts, and a cultivated understanding.”<sup>153</sup> Hays makes certain to disregard this kind of fatherly advice in her novel, and Emma constructs a decisive portrayal of herself not as a model of female excellence but as an assertive, passionate woman who desires equality in education, love, and life. However, Hays does include a discussion on conduct book values in which a foppish dinner guest represents these ideological principles and is met with resistance by Mr. Courtney and Mr. Francis.

Emma’s early exposure to sexist attitudes is gained at her father’s dinner table when a coxcomb, who learns of her studious reading, contests to Mr. Courtney that “knowledge and learning are insufferably masculine in a woman— [who is] born only

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<sup>152</sup> Hays 36.

<sup>153</sup> Gregory, John. *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters*. 1774. London: J. Millar, 1796. 41. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. Web. 28 July 2011.

for the soft solace of man! The mind of a young lady should be clear and unsullied, like a sheet of white paper.”<sup>154</sup> The man of fashion recites principles found in conduct book ideology that enforces the image of feminine perfection, but the young Emma is immediately skeptical of the foundation of this argument. Fordyce’s popular *Sermons to Young Women* impressed a notion, similar to the one expressed by the coxcomb, to women that the chief business of their sex is “to read men, in order to make yourselves agreeable and useful.”<sup>155</sup> The coxcomb, who defends conduct book principles, evinces the satirical manner in which conduct book ideology is presented within the text. Hays satirizes the male authors of conduct books as foppish men who spout impracticable criteria for female conduct, intellectual accomplishments, amusements, domestic duties, and dress because the true value of women reside in “female embodiments as wife, mother, domestic economist, and educator.”<sup>156</sup>

In response, Mr. Courtney rebuffs this fashionable man’s speech that a woman should be wholly dependent on a man; instead, he argues that “a young woman of sense and spirit needs no other protection” than herself.<sup>157</sup> As a fellow dinner guest, Mr. Francis also contributes his opinion to the conversation by adding that no person’s mind can effectively be a blank piece of paper unless both deaf and blind because if “any inlet

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<sup>154</sup> Hays 57. The man of fashion, Mr. Courtney’s dinner guest, recites the tenets expressed in popular conduct books, especially Dr. James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) and John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1774).

<sup>155</sup> Fordyce, James. *Sermons to Young Women*. 1766. Vol. 2. London: A. Millar. 1766. 11. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. Web. 28 July 2011.

<sup>156</sup> Sutherland, Kathryn. “Writings on Education and Conduct: Arguments for Female Improvement.” *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700-1800*. Ed. Vivien Jones. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 25-45. Print. 25.

<sup>157</sup> Hays 58.

to perception remains, your paper will infallibly contract characters of some kind, or be blotted and scrawled!”<sup>158</sup> Hays accepted the notion of *tabula rasa*<sup>159</sup> as correct for both sexes, and as Mr. Francis argues, the “blank slates” of children become filled by both sensory perception, education, and cultural influences and will not remain empty for long.<sup>160</sup> Accordingly, Emma’s ardent mind and ambitions are affected by education and convention that prohibit the exercise of understanding and application of knowledge in a constructive profession. Mr. Courtney’s and Mr. Francis’ defense of female intelligence and their refutation of the idealistic woman heighten Emma’s belief that women are capable and intellectual beings. Compellingly, the absence of ideal female subjectivity within the narrative tellingly reveals Hays’ reluctance to engage the ubiquitous image of the ideal, domestic woman.

As represented in other novels, the demure proper women, illustrated by Rousseau’s agreeable Sophie and Inchbald’s robotic-like Miss Fenton, are conventionally rewarded for their virtuous and compliant behavior through marriage but must continually subordinate their own wills as they have been educated to do so.<sup>161</sup> These female characters are praised by patriarchal society for their display of proper femininity, dependent upon “the prescriptive force of a set of mental and emotional

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<sup>158</sup> Hays 58.

<sup>159</sup> *Tabula rasa* is the philosophical foundation for the respective philosophies of John Locke, David Hartley, and Claude Adrien Helvétius.

<sup>160</sup> Nowka, Scott A. “Materialism and Feminism in Mary Hays’s *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*.” *European Romantic Review* 18.4 (2007): 521-540. Print. 524, 531

<sup>161</sup> I am referring to Rousseau’s *Émile, or On Education* (1762) and Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791). Sophie symbolizes Rousseau’s depiction of woman as naturally inferior to men; therefore, nature dictates that Sophie should be not only obedient but also always agreeable to men’s desires. In Inchbald’s novel, Lord Dorriforth uses the flat character of Miss Fenton as a model for Miss Milner to emulate.

qualities culturally defined as ‘feminine’: sympathy, decorous accomplishment, [and] chastity.”<sup>162</sup> Recurrent literary images of and conduct book instruction on proper femininity contribute to the conception of the female gender as universally subordinate; the identity of this ideal, feminine woman “is compelled by social sanction and taboo,”<sup>163</sup> but the lack of presence in *Emma Courtney* is significant. Unlike the comparisons between Miss Milner (later Lady Elmwood) and Miss Fenton and even Lady Elmwood and her daughter Matilda in Inchbald’s *A Simple Story*, Hays does not directly compare Emma to a proper, feminine woman; rather, she empowers Emma to describe in her own words the distinction between her sex and herself. Although Hays chooses a different approach to display gender behavior, some similarity does exist between the two passionate characters of Miss Milner and Emma.

Both Inchbald and Hays wrote during the tumultuous period of the 1790s, and it is likely that Hays would have been familiar with Inchbald’s work due to their mutual sympathy and support of the French Revolution and women’s rights. Miss Milner and Emma share the same impulsive, passionate demeanor, and both characters perform the masculine role of aggressor in their romantic relationships; moreover, the two characters revolt against proper decorum that dictates female passivity and silence. They represent different versions of female deviance and reveal the two authors’ varying methods to critique gender construction. Throughout Inchbald’s novel, Miss Milner is judged according to what she is not (domestic, demure, prudent, obedient, and silent), and the

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<sup>162</sup> Sutherland 25.

<sup>163</sup> Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*. Ed. Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim. New York: Routledge, 2003. 415-27. Print. 416.

numerous evaluations, from the narrator, characters, and even the reader, enforce the harsh judgment of the “unthinking”<sup>164</sup> and frivolously educated Miss Milner. Miss Milner blatantly defies proper female behavior through her passionate outbursts, her coquettish conduct, and her illicit affair, and she pays dearly with a self-imposed seclusion and a long, anguishing illness and death. In effect, Inchbald’s novel sustains the idea that women who deviate from gender boundaries are punished. Hays, on the other hand, empowers Emma with the position of narrator and protagonist; in control of her narrative and cognizant of gender inequality, Emma consciously presents her identity not as a model of the ideal, feminine woman but as an “improperly educated” woman who is governed by reason and passion. Emma objects to customary gender conventions through her offer of herself to a married man and her provoking questions regarding female intellectual equality, yet she is not punished in the traditional manner. Consequently, Hays’ narrative prompts the reader to evaluate Emma’s character in accordance with the underlying philosophical argument of sexual and educational equality.

Although regarded solely as a deviant character, the younger Emma, in many respects, is comparable to other innocent young women whose naïveté and inexperience are the root causes of social miscues and errors in judgment. Emma’s disillusionment and unpreparedness for the larger world closely resembles the faltering of another well-known female protagonist, Burney’s *Evelina*, as she enters into society.<sup>165</sup> On the whole,

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<sup>164</sup> Inchbald 342.

<sup>165</sup> Frances Burney’s *Evelina, or, the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1778) which details the trials and tribulations of Evelina (Anville) Belmont’s, a proper young lady educated by her



Burney's *Evelina* is a conservative, epistolary novel of manners, but it provides an intimate view of young girl grappling to conduct herself decorously in the perplexing world of British society. *Emma Courtney* similarly reflects a first person point view of the maturation of the young Emma and her struggles to comprehend the world around her. The indulgent upbringing of the two young girls in the care of their respective guardians results in both girls erring due to their integrity and ignorance of the exterior world. Both Emma's and Evelina's nescience of social decorum, specifically regarding the opposite sex, renders them susceptible to censure. The two female characters individually reflect a "conscious[ness] of purity of intention [and a] superior[ity] to all disguise or evasion"<sup>166</sup> that shields them from the corrupting nature of society. On the one hand, Evelina and Emma both experience disappointment and shock to find the world, outside their previous residences of their relations, to be corrupted by prejudice, vanity, and inconstancy. On the other hand, however, Evelina's and Emma's reactions to their informed world views decisively separate the two female characters into the binary classifications of improper and proper.

Evelina and Emma, although both flawed, represent the conflict between conforming to traditional standards and enacting progressive ambitions. The ideal female figure is finally realized in Evelina whose rewards are the reconciliation with her biological father, who restores her birthright, and her marriage to Lord Orville; interestingly, Matilda's story from Inchbald's *A Simple Story* has a similar outcome:

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guardian Reverend Villars, "coming out" into society as she must learn to ingratiate herself into proper society.

<sup>166</sup> Hays 78.

Matilda's reunion with her father, recognition of kinship as Lady Matilda, and marriage (not definite but quite likely) to Rushbrook. Burney and even Inchbald, considered as a radical writer, failed in the end to enable their female characters to deviate from convention. Alternately, Emma epitomizes the evolvement of women's desires for educational advancement and gender equality that had taken place during the intervening eighteen years between the publication of *Evelina* and *Emma Courtney*. Contrasting sharply with Evelina's admitted inability to act on her own judgment and her complete acceptance of her proper gender role, Emma's perceived impropriety stems from her resistance of social conformity and her strong will and reliance on her own reasoning. The development of Emma's mind is greatly influenced by her unconventional education, and it is her father, an unlikely defender, who encourages her to use her intelligence and shrewdness to guide her actions.

In her eighteenth year, the parental figures of her aunt Mrs. Melmoth and her father Mr. Courtney die, and Emma is left alone. On his deathbed, Mr. Courtney acknowledges Emma's excellent mind and describes her as "possessing an understanding superior to [her] sex and age",<sup>167</sup> and clinging to his earlier conviction, he suggests that she depend on her own fortitude and use her mental talents to assist her entrance into the world as an independent girl of nineteen. He furthermore advises against marriage unless for financial necessity.<sup>168</sup> Mr. Courtney's cynicism concerning marriage and love is most likely in part to his own experiences, but it is also a testament to his opinion of Emma's capabilities to rely on her own judgment for survival. In

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<sup>167</sup> Hays 64.

<sup>168</sup> Hays 64.

Emma's case, as the "improperly educated" woman, she represents the amalgamation of both masculine and feminine learning. The fluctuation of the two extremes (intellectuality and social and gender oppression) pull at educated females who desire to contribute their faculties through professional employment but are unable to do so in many cases due to its impropriety.

Following these deaths, Emma learns of her dependent state and discovers that she has no other recourse than to stay with her paternal uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Morton even though she does possess the necessary knowledge and skills to support herself if given the opportunity. Engaging in self-reflection and deep thought, Emma attempts to better understand the cultural values and social custom that determine the direction of a woman's life; she exclaims:

Cruel prejudices! [. . .] hapless woman! Why was I not educated for commerce, for a profession, for labour? Why have I been rendered feeble and delicate by bodily constraint, and fastidious by artificial refinement? Why are we bound, by the habits of society, as with an adamant chain? Why do we suffer ourselves to be confined within a magic circle, without daring, by a magnanimous effort, to dissolve the barbarous spell? <sup>169</sup>

She appeals to the female sex to protest this treatment and places the responsibility on women to inspire the necessary change. While Emma implicitly blames social custom and current educational practices for her current circumstances, she also holds herself and the entire female sex culpable for remaining passive agents in their lives and

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<sup>169</sup> Hays 65-6.

education. The “magic circle” is culturally and socially enforced through established patterns of gender-appropriate conduct and the exclusion of the female sex from most of the professional workforce. The conflict between developing the female mind and the cultural emphasis on female corporeality is inherent in the female education system, and the lack of mental and physical challenges for the average female in eighteenth-century Britain sustained the stereotype of the weak and ignorant woman.

The teaching offered to the female sex shapes their characters and influences the direction of their lives, and Emma and the other female characters in the novel, such as Mrs. Morton and her daughters, are products of their respective educations. Mrs. Morton’s pompous attitude and fashionable accomplishments reflect superficial learning. Moreover, Mrs. Morton’s defensive and insolent response to Emma’s offer to assist in Sarah and Ann Morton’s education reveals her conformity to the division of education according to gender and class station. Under the direction of their mother, Sarah and Ann are nurtured in the art of affectation and spend their time in frivolity. The brief glimpses of the Morton women’s conduct substantiate the elder Emma’s earlier claim to her son Augustus that “we are all the creatures of education.”<sup>170</sup> Unmistakably, Emma embodies this type of figuration as her character is both created and restrained by her sex, education, family, and social position.

Environmental determinism, according to Scott Nowka, accounted for women’s general acceptance of gender inequality due to the inculcation of gender oppression in

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<sup>170</sup> Hays 42.

education, social, and cultural practices.<sup>171</sup> Drawing from Helvétius's writing,<sup>172</sup> Hays defends the intellectual capabilities of the female sex as equal to males and contends that environmental factors of society, family, custom, and education determined the stereotype of female behavior, typically characterized as superficial, capricious, foolish, and sentimental. Environmental determinism plays a major role in Emma's and Francis's philosophical arguments regarding the development of the human psyche. Relating her apprehensions of her vulnerable position as a young single woman, Emma explains to Francis, "The character, you tell me, is modified by circumstances: the customs of society, then, have enslaved, enervated, and degraded woman."<sup>173</sup> Francis acknowledges the truth to her statement based on his articulation of Godwin's "theory of 'necessity,' which argu[ed] that humans are shaped by their circumstances and that one's ability to act freely is delimited by a complex of education, experience, and social institutions."<sup>174</sup> Emma adopts Francis' theoretical stance on environmental determinism in her later arguments on gender bias and ineffectual female educational practices; however, as the correspondence progresses, Emma discerns that Francis' philosophy is not germane to her "distinctly gendered social position"<sup>175</sup> as an unprotected, single woman.

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<sup>171</sup> Nowka 524.

<sup>172</sup> Hays interpreted the sensationalist psychology, as proposed by Locke, David Hartley, and Helvétius, as a valuable scientific theory to recognize that females have comparable mental capabilities to males, and they are negatively affected by conventional gender restrictions and stereotypes.

<sup>173</sup> Hays 73.

<sup>174</sup> Wallace 21.

<sup>175</sup> Logan, Peter Melville. *Nerves and Narratives: A Cultural History of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century British Prose*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997. Print. 62.

### ***Engaging “Improper” Education***

Emma’s progressive “miseducation” provides a large body of knowledge that is utilized in both her conversations and letters with Francis, in which she freely speaks her mind on issues affecting her. In their extended correspondence, Emma and Francis, a philosopher and mentor, exchange several letters, three of which are included in entirety within the text. In the first and second letters shared, Emma writes to Francis seeking wisdom and guidance in regards to her disillusionment of the ways of the world and her despair over her unrequited love. Distressed by the disjunction she perceives between theory and practice of virtuous behavior, Emma writes to Francis seeking reassurance that virtue, in fact, exists in the world and that the pursuit of truth and advancement of reason beget happiness. During this initial correspondence, Francis responds to Emma’s skepticism by explaining that “the mind is modified by the circumstances in which it is placed, by the accidents of birth and education; constitutions of society are all, as yet, imperfect; they have generated, and perpetuated, many mistakes [ . . . ] The growth of reason is slow, but not the less sure; the increase of knowledge must necessarily prepare the way for the increase of virtue and happiness.”<sup>176</sup> Emma confesses, however, in her second letter to Francis that her efforts to “cultivate my understanding, and exercise my reason”<sup>177</sup> did not achieve the level of happiness that she hitherto aspired as the controlling force of custom compels women to remain “insulated beings”<sup>178</sup> and mere observers of life. “Improperly educated” women, who are learned, are denied valuable

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<sup>176</sup> Hays 81-2.

<sup>177</sup> Hays 115.

<sup>178</sup> Hays 116.

opportunities, as a result of their sex, to exercise their mental aptitude and sensibility in a useful manner; furthermore, they are ostracized from the acceptable society due to the “masculinization” of their minds from their studies.

Custom, as a controlling force of the state of education, further cements the barrier between the sexes and perpetuates the subservient role of woman. This second letter to Francis reveals her growing frustration with the unfulfilling womanly existence of empty conversations, domestic drudgery, and frivolous shopping, but it also discloses the struggle to divest herself completely of the conventional “avocations” of her sex even though she recognizes their insufficiency “to engross, [and] to satisfy, the active, aspiring, mind.”<sup>179</sup> The enduring conflict between the suitably accomplished, feminine woman and an “improperly educated,” masculinized woman induces Emma to seek an equalizing pedagogy to bridge the intellectual gap between the sexes created by divisive social customs and disparate education systems. Continuing in her second letter, she laments the derisive treatment of erudite women; in consequence to this social disapprobation, “the eccentricities of conduct, with which women of superior minds have been accused – the struggles, the despairing though generous struggles, of an ardent spirit, denied a scope for its exertions!”<sup>180</sup> Emma rejects the female “disempowerment imposed by domesticity”<sup>181</sup> as definitive and considers an alternate program of education and a broadening of vocations available to women as a vast improvement to the situation of her sex.

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<sup>179</sup> Hays 116.

<sup>180</sup> Hays 116.

<sup>181</sup> Rajan, Tilottama. *Romantic Narrative: Shelley, Hays, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010. Print. 111.

In subsequent letters, Francis, as a severe rationalist, provokes Emma to arise from her sadness to view what he believes to be the shallowness of her pain and the inevitable destructiveness of sensibility. In his third response, Francis informs Emma that “the whole force of every thing [*sic*] which like a misfortune was assiduously, unintermittedly, provided by yourself.”<sup>182</sup> He goes on to explain that “evils of this sort are the brood of folly begotten upon fastidious indolence. They shrink into non-entity, when touched by the wand of truth.”<sup>183</sup> Despite Francis’ harsh philosophical advice and her own emotional pain, Emma responds with fierceness for her own philosophical understanding of the world and confidence in the unified power of reason and passion. Regardless of the perceived impropriety, Emma maintains her passionate commitment to be self-reliant and dependent upon her own judgment to make decisions. She adamantly argues to Mr. Francis, “my reason was the auxiliary of my passion, or rather my passion the generative principle of my reason [. . .] Had not these contradictions, these oppositions, roused the energy of my mind, I might have been domesticated, tamely, in the lap of indolence and apathy.”<sup>184</sup> She describes the correlation between passion, as the initiative to reason, and reason, as the supplement to passion, but she slightly privileges passion as the determining principle of intelligent thought and directly challenges the established preference for logic. The consideration of passion as the stimulus for reason implies the significance of this “feminine” trait in the cognitive process.

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<sup>182</sup> Hays 169.

<sup>183</sup> Hays 170.

<sup>184</sup> Hays 172.



In the continuation of her third letter and her most direct response to Francis, Emma reveals the shortsightedness of his philosophical teaching of independence as the main principle of enlightened reason.<sup>185</sup> The failure to consider the limitations of sex discloses a glaring flaw in Francis' philosophy that all men are capable of independence through cultivated reason. He views dependence as insufferable and vows that he will not be "weak and criminal enough, to make my peace depend upon the precarious thread of another's life or another's pleasure."<sup>186</sup> Emma astutely observes that Francis neglects his earlier remarks on social inequalities and the errors of political institutions as the source of mankind's faults, and she employs his line of reasoning to show the enormous impact on society's inhabitants: "why call woman, miserable, oppressed, and impotent, woman – *crushed, and then insulted* – why call her to *independence* – which not nature, but the barbarous and accursed laws of society, have denied her. *This is mockery!*"<sup>187</sup> Cognizant of the sexual double standard that permeates all levels of society, Emma voices indignation for Francis' insensitiveness to gender inequality in his lesson on the importance of independence as an individual. Emma further expounds on her situation, arguing that she was "excluded, as it were, by the pride, luxury, and caprice, of the world, from expanding my sensations, and wedding my soul to society, I was constrained to bestow the strong affections, that glowed consciously within me, upon a few."<sup>188</sup> Emma reminds Francis that as a female, her exposure to the world outside her small domestic sphere is quite limited and she argues that a female's commonly static

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<sup>185</sup> Hays 170.

<sup>186</sup> Hays 170.

<sup>187</sup> Hays 173.

<sup>188</sup> Hays 173.

existence creates an environment that intensifies emotional attachments because there is a lack of stimulating employment. In order to be effectually persuasive, Emma skillfully employs a variety of techniques to demonstrate the overt inequality in Francis' philosophical argument.

Composing her fourth letter to Francis, Emma references the Roman myths of Jupiter and Hercules and the biblical narrative of Samson as examples of the power of disappointed love that causes these men to succumb to this evil of the human condition. Emma counters Francis' clinical rationalism and his admiration of the great men of antiquity (Alexander and Caesar) "as proof of power, the destructive courage of an Alexander [the Great]" and "honour [of] the pernicious ambition of an Augustus Caesar, as bespeaking the potent, energetic mind!"<sup>189</sup> She pointedly asks Francis "why should *you* affect to be intolerant to a passion, though differing in nature, generated on the same principles, and by a parallel process[?]"<sup>190</sup> Francis rejects Emma's impassioned feelings and actions towards Harley because he associates this emotion with insanity, unnaturalness, and "moon-struck madness."<sup>191</sup> However, by drawing on her knowledge of Roman and Greek myth, biblical passages, history of antiquity, and eighteenth-century poetry (Thomas Gray and Alexander Pope), Emma counters Francis' argument using the masculine tools of reason and references to male authored literature. Francis does not directly respond to Emma's impressive objections to his declarations, and Emma does not include any further details other than she felt gratitude for the

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<sup>189</sup> Hays 176.

<sup>190</sup> Hays 176.

<sup>191</sup> Hays 169.

stimulation of her mind. Furthermore, during this period, Emma writes to another man and in her letters, she employs similar techniques.

Emma also utilizes her learning in her brief correspondence and dialogue with Augustus Harley, an educated gentleman and her object of affection, in a primarily one-sided exchange in which Emma is the main correspondent. She uses a variety of techniques including quoting lines from drama and poetry, alluding to philosophical works, and citing biblical verses to persuade Harley of the purity of their relationship. Emma's letters to and conversations with Harley reveal the range of her reading of contemporary eighteenth-century works of Thomas Holcroft, Oliver Goldsmith, Edward Young, and James Thomson. One of the recurring themes in her letters is the appeal to reason as Emma describes their mutual sympathies and envisions a union between minds. She quotes Young's "Love of Fame" to argue that "my opinions have not been lightly formed: — it is not to the personal graces, though 'the body charms, because the mind is seen,' but to the virtues and talents of the individual (for without intellect, virtue is an empty name), that my heart does homage."<sup>192</sup> Her continued entreaty is that her affection is rational and passionate and her motives are pure. Although her sensibility appears excessive, Emma's unconventional education and extensive reading is not entirely to blame as she repeatedly blames Harley for his silence, which fuels her imagination and attributes the combination of "reason, culture, taste, and delicacy" in resulting "to chasten, to refine, to exalt[,] [and] to sanctify"<sup>193</sup> her natural affections. Emma is compelled to "feel these affections in a supreme degree [because] a mind

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<sup>192</sup> Hays 113.

<sup>193</sup> Hays 119.

enriched by literature and expanded by fancy and reflection”<sup>194</sup> necessitates it. Her strong conviction that reason and passion should be in unison continues to be the overarching argument in her petitions to Harley for reciprocation and in the substantiation to her suspicions of his reluctance.

Emma ponders Harley’s assertion that one has an obligation “to make our reason conquer the sensibility of our heart.”<sup>195</sup> Refusing to view sensibility as a sign of weakness of either sex, she argues that “an attachment sanctioned by nature, reason, and virtue, ennobles the mind capable of conceiving and cherishing it.”<sup>196</sup> During the late eighteenth-century, it was assumed that either sex would experience a type of feminization if sensibility was not properly restrained and regulated,<sup>197</sup> and “the deviation of a solitary individual from rules sanctioned by usage, by prejudice, by expediency, would be regarded as romantic”<sup>198</sup> and a sign of weakness. Drawing from her own experiences and reflection, Emma doubts the legitimacy of this viewpoint and counters by highlighting the interrelationship between reason and sensibility: “Is, then, apathy the perfection of our nature – and is not that nature refined and harmonized by the gentle and social affections? The Being who gave to the mind its reason, gave also to the heart its sensibility.”<sup>199</sup> She contends that sensibility and the capability for emotion is not gendered but is simply a human trait.<sup>200</sup> Admittedly, Emma’s ultimate motive is to

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<sup>194</sup> Hays 120.

<sup>195</sup> Hays 112.

<sup>196</sup> Hays 112.

<sup>197</sup> Sutherland 25.

<sup>198</sup> Hays 110.

<sup>199</sup> Hays 112.

<sup>200</sup> Joy 227.

gain the love and affection of Harley, but her argument is not completely devoid of logic. In her struggle to win Harley's attention and affection, Emma is also arguing for a renewed understanding of rationality and sensibility as not exclusive of either sex. Emma insightfully identifies cultural and social refinement as the main source for forming one's character to *become* apathetic as opposed to biologically determined.

As Emma earlier contends, female education "has given [her] a sexual character",<sup>201</sup> and even though she has a cultivated understanding, she still suffers from restrictions placed upon the oppressed female sex. Peter Melville Logan explains that "Hays's representation of excess sensibility constructs female sexuality as a diseased product of woman's social condition. Trapped within bodies that are sexualized by their early education and by restrictions on social activity, women become immersed within an isolated and overpowering sensibility."<sup>202</sup> Although fortunate to receive the learning that she did, she expresses her disdain for the conventional training of women into weak superficial beings. Emma argues that single females, with little or no fortune, have no other recourse from their penurious conditions but to prostitute their bodies and subject themselves to social ostracism and censure. Reflecting the "fatal repercussions of repression on the eighteenth-century middle-class woman,"<sup>203</sup> Emma condemns social prejudices, societal hierarchy, and educational injustice as hindrances to women who seek independence. Emma's dependence is clearly created by suppressive gender construction rather than biologically determined.

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<sup>201</sup> Hays 149.

<sup>202</sup> Logan 67.

<sup>203</sup> Ty, Eleanor. *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993. Print. 46.

Without the financial and emotional support of her family or a husband, Emma's fate is uncertain as her circumstances continue to change: her unpleasant stay with her paternal uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Morton; her joyful residence with Mrs. Harley in isolated retirement; her extended visit with her cousin Mrs. Denbeigh in London; and later, her unhappy lodging at the London boarding house. Emma's situation is exacerbated by her gender and financial status; as a woman with a small inheritance, she is unable to obtain employment, other than an undesirable governess position, to provide the necessary funds to live independently. The departure of Mrs. Denbeigh to India and the death of Mrs. Harley leave Emma in an exceedingly vulnerable state as she is without an established residence or steady income. In her desperate condition, she strives to understand the harsh realities of womanhood and laments the futility of female education in securing an autonomous life without a fortune:

Active, industrious, willing to employ my faculties in any way, by which I might procure an honest independence, I beheld no path open to me, but that [. . .] of servitude. Hapless woman! – crushed by the iron hand of barbarous despotism, pampered into weakness, and trained the slave of meretricious folly! – what wonder, that, shrinking from the chill blasts of penury (which the pernicious habits of thy education have little fitted thy tender frame to encounter) thou listenest to the honied accents of the spoiler, and, to escape the galling chain of servile dependence, rushest

into the career of infamy, from whence the false and cruel morality of the world forbids thy return, and perpetuates thy disgrace and misery!<sup>204</sup>

Emma finds herself in a perilous situation as gender and class restrain her efforts to employ her knowledge and skill in a productive manner. Although she has experienced adversity in her life, Emma is aghast to find the choice of servitude or prostitution as the only options available to her. As illustrated by Emma's dilemma, a paradox of education clearly exists: learning creates an awareness of the adverse gender inequality present in education and society. Sharma states, "Hays's novel demystifies the whole construction of gender-specific behaviour [*sic*] and firmly locates it on the insidious, almost invisible, substructure of educational practice."<sup>205</sup> It should be noted that even if Emma would have received a proper education and exhibited feminine behavior, her current circumstances would not have likely differed due to the absence of her family's protection, her unmarried state, and her meager fortune. It is implicitly argued that Emma's improper education is not the actual source for her misfortune; instead, the reason for her continued hardships is attributed to social and cultural conditions.

Adversity continues to afflict Emma as her compulsory marriage to Montague is plagued with jealousy and melancholy and ends tragically with Montague's suicide; also, the reappearance and agonizing death of Harley and the sudden loss of her daughter further impair Emma's constitution. Conventionally, Emma's "miseducation" and unsuitable conduct would inevitably result in one of three different conclusions: her display of contrition and her subsequent banishment from society, her repentance of her

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<sup>204</sup> Hays 191-92.

<sup>205</sup> Sharma 144.

errors and her painful death, or her conversion to Christian morality and her acceptance of her proper duties of wife and motherhood. While Emma's sexual desire for Harley is never consummated, her sexual aggression and outspokenness of her desires convey a rejection of traditional social decorum.<sup>206</sup> Hays negotiates the redemption of the "improperly educated" woman not through death or a proper marriage but through a life of eventual independence. The replacement of the "fall from grace" theme to a motif of adaptation and performance demonstrates the female character's ability to learn through experience and observation. Writers Eliza Haywood and Frances Burney concluded their respective novels<sup>207</sup> by ultimately adhering to the literary tradition of the heroine's marriage and her fulfillment of the sanctioned roles of wife and mother; however, Hays does not completely abide by this convention as Emma experiences singleness, marriage, and widowhood. Although Emma does marry and have a child, the husband and the daughter each die unexpectedly, and at the end of the novel, Emma remains a widow but continues to perform the motherly duties for her adopted son Augustus. It should be acknowledged that Emma experiences a difficult life involving "*the pangs of contemned love* – the disappointment of rational plans of usefulness – the dissolution of the darling hopes of maternal pride and fondness";<sup>208</sup> nevertheless, she traverses these obstacles to her best ability despite gender and social restraints. Importantly, Emma's unconventional narrative does not fully succumb to social pressures. As the "improperly educated"

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<sup>206</sup> Todd, Janet. *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing, and Fiction, 1660-1800*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989. Print. 247.

<sup>207</sup> I am referring to Haywood's *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) and Burney's *Evelina* (1778).

<sup>208</sup> Hays 220.



woman, it is significant that she endures prejudice and censure and lives longer than most of the people she encounters throughout her life.

Emma remarkably survives the deaths of all but one of her educators and mentors, however, he (Francis) also withdraws from Emma's life due to his departure from London. The demise of her uncle and aunt, the Melmoths; her father, Mr. Courtney; and her desired lover and tutor, Harley symbolizes Hays' implicit argument for the dissolution of the contemporary education system that "contaminate[s] the purity of the mind."<sup>209</sup> Significantly, Emma, as the survivor of the deaths of the male figures in her life (and the departure of Mr. Francis), "register[s] the bankruptcy of the patriarchal order."<sup>210</sup> Emma argues that the university, the culmination of the education system, requires a moral degradation of man that ensnares the mind "in an inexplicable maze of error and contradiction, *poison virtue at its source*, and lay the foundation for a duplicity of character and a perversion of reason, destructive of every manly principle of integrity."<sup>211</sup> She rejects the state of education at all levels as corrupted for either sex, and Emma finally abandons the masculine, philosophical utterances that discount the female sex's cultural and social condition. Ultimately, "proper" education, as socially dictated, presents a threat to humankind's pursuit of truth and happiness because it distorts an individual's effort for purposefulness and personal meaning.

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<sup>209</sup> Hays 219.

<sup>210</sup> Rajan, Tilottama. "Autonarration and Genotext in Mary Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*." *Romanticism, History and the Possibilities of Genre*. Ed. Tilottama Rajan and Julia M. Wright. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 213-39. Print. 233.

<sup>211</sup> Hays 219.

### ***Conclusion***

Although she is a victim of society due to her sex and station, Emma controls the account of her history, and in a deliberate manner, she does not completely “‘undermine’ [. . .] the earlier assertions of the passionate, desiring voice.”<sup>212</sup> Unlike the forceful, direct rhetoric of the younger version of herself, the elder Emma’s voice can be described as “intricate and imprisoned [and] can make itself heard only by self-contradiction, by negating the sentiments and expressions of the earlier sexualized self.”<sup>213</sup> However, the elder Emma, who has gained life experience and hands-on knowledge, continues to portray the strain between her individual beliefs and gender politics. Modern scholars have noted the inconsistency between the novel’s stated purpose in the preface to serve as a warning of the errors of sensibility and Emma’s recurrent advice to Augustus to preserve his sensibility. This contradiction arguably reflects the struggle faced by Hays to validate sensibility as an essential part of a comprehensive education while simultaneously confronting the “counter-current dictates of gender subjectivity.”<sup>214</sup>

In the final letter to Augustus and the closing of the novel, Emma continues to preserve a place of importance for passion and does not explicitly blame the passions of her youth for the disappointment and rejection in her life. Instead, she reminds Augustus and the reader once again of the ills of the “constitutions of society – a lurking poison that spreads its contagion far and wide – a canker at the root of private virtue and private

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<sup>212</sup> Tsomondo, Thorell Porter. *The Not So Blank "Blank Page": The Politics of Narrative and the Woman Narrator in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century English Novel*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007. Print. 67.

<sup>213</sup> Tsomondo 66.

<sup>214</sup> Tsomondo 74.

happiness – a principle of deception, that sanctifies error – a Circean cup that lulls into a fatal intoxication.”<sup>215</sup> Emma, who believes reformation possible, confesses to Augustus that it will be a long, arduous process until men “emancipate the human mind from the trammels of superstition, and teach it, *that its true dignity and virtue, consist in being free*.”<sup>216</sup> Emma’s hope for the freedom of intellectual rights and an improvement in female education does not diminish at the close of the narrative; rather, she offers one last reminder that culture and society must be reformed in order for the female sex to find intellectual independence and to employ their knowledge in useful endeavors.

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<sup>215</sup> Hays 220-21.

<sup>216</sup> Hays 221.

CHAPTER IV

FEMALE EDUCATION REEXAMINED: TRANSFORMATION OF THE  
“IMPROPERLY EDUCATED” WOMAN IN *BELINDA*

In 1801, Maria Edgeworth published her first novel, *Belinda*, which she distinguished as a “Moral Tale”<sup>217</sup> in the advertisement of the text. Edgeworth’s nuanced classification of her “moral tale” unequivocally reveals her intention to make a clear distinction between the disrepute of the novel and her prudent narrative. Modern scholars have delved into the rich depths of Edgeworth’s novel of development, discussing a breadth of topics, ranging from miscegenation and colonialism to domesticity and female rationality. Despite the novel’s title dedication to the presumed heroine, many scholars have embraced the unruly, sexualized Lady Delacour as the most compelling character, who instills vibrant interest into the narrative through her antics and even intriguing reformation of female deviance. Feminist critics in the 1980s and 1990s were drawn to the paradoxical figure of Lady Delacour, who actively portrayed an independent agency yet privately professed traditional values.

Unsurprisingly, critical focus has been placed on the dichotomous characterization between the titular heroine Belinda Portman and her companion Lady Delacour, and many scholars agree that Edgeworth’s narrative places more emphasis on the deviant hostess than the demure female protagonist. Marjorie Lightfoot deems Belinda’s prudent behavior as “ironically irrational”, particularly in relation to her relationship with Clarence Hervey while regarding Lady Delacour as “well-meaning

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<sup>217</sup> Edgeworth, Maria. *Belinda*. 1801. Ed. Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. Print. 3.

[and] morally equivocal.”<sup>218</sup> Catherine Toal candidly describes the vacuous character of Belinda in concurrence with Annette Wheeler Cafarelli’s harsh evaluation of Belinda’s display of insipidity equal with Virginia St. Pierre, the naïve bride-to-be of Clarence Hervey.<sup>219</sup> Beth Kowaleski-Wallace faults Belinda’s apathetic attitude and lack of inner-conflict as one of the novel’s major flaws as her role as heroine is subordinated for wise counsel to her chaperone<sup>220</sup>; therefore, the narrative focuses on the reform of the “always [. . .] more interesting and complex character” of Lady Delacour through Belinda’s encouragement and proper example rather than on the actual female protagonist herself.<sup>221</sup> Lady Delacour undeniably captivates the reader’s attention while Belinda commands less of a presence within the narrative, as Edgeworth herself privately confesses when asked to make revisions to the novel for inclusion in the 1809 edition of the British Novelists Series. In correspondence with Mrs. Ruxton, Edgeworth explains, “I really was so provoked with the cold tameness of that stick or stone Belinda that I could have torn the pages to pieces—and really have not the heart or patience to *correct* her.”<sup>222</sup> This quote is frequently cited by critics who exploit Edgeworth’s admission as a supporting reason to disregard the titular heroine in their analyses favoring Lady Delacour.

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<sup>218</sup> Lightfoot, Marjorie. “‘Morals for Those that Like Them’: The Satire of Edgeworth’s *Belinda*, 1801.” *Eire-Ireland* 29.4 (1994): 117-31. Print. 121.

<sup>219</sup> Toal, Catherine. “Control Experiment: Edgeworth’s Critique of Rousseau’s Educational Theory.” *An Uncomfortable Authority: Maria Edgeworth and Her Contexts*. Ed. Heidi Kaufman and Chris Fauske. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2004. 212-31. Print. 223.

<sup>220</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace, Beth. *Their Fathers’ Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. Print. 109.

<sup>221</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace 260.

<sup>222</sup> qtd. in Kirkpatrick, Katherine J., ed. *Belinda*. By Maria Edgeworth. 1801. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994. iv-xxv. Print. xxii.

Fortunately, not all critics consider Belinda as inferior in importance to Lady Delacour; Heather MacFadyen, Katherine Montwieler, and Toni Wein, respectively provide compelling analyses of Belinda's representation as a domestic female figure and implicit critique of female stereotypes. In contrast with past critiques, MacFadyen distinguishes Belinda and Lady Delacour through their respective reading practices, fashionable and domestic, which reflect their differentiating social mores but argues that Edgeworth employs both types of readers to demonstrate the potential for women to reflect both "domestic and literary authority."<sup>223</sup> Montwieler, drawing upon Judith Butler's study of gender performance in *Gender Trouble*, characterizes Belinda, Lady Delacour, as well as the exemplary Lady Anne Percival as actresses of gender performance, presenting portrayals of varying degrees of femininity, ranging from conventional to transgressive, with variant results of social reception, noting that the ideal female figures perhaps are more consistent in their performances.<sup>224</sup> Wein applauds Belinda's displays of both prudence and desire, crediting Belinda as representing "the successful separation of female prudence from notions of female propriety."<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, Wein insightfully argues that Belinda's median behavior between idealistic and deviant reveals Edgeworth's efforts to prove the female sex's equal ability to govern their own individual selves against dictates of social custom or cultural expectations.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> MacFadyen, Heather. "Lady Delacour's Library: Maria Edgeworth's Belinda and Fashionable Reading." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 48.4 (1994): 423-39. Print. 426, 439.

<sup>224</sup> Montwieler, Katherine. "Reading Disease: The Corrupting Performance of Edgeworth's *Belinda*." *Women's Writing* 12.3 (2005): 347-368. Print. 350, 358, 361.

<sup>225</sup> Wein, Toni. "'Dear Prudence': The Art of Management and the Management of Art in Edgeworth's *Belinda*." *Women's Studies* 31(2002): 299-322. Print. 303.

<sup>226</sup> Wein 318.

It is my argument that Belinda represents more than proper domesticity or complacent insipidity; rather, she presents Edgeworth's effort to reconcile gendered virtues of "masculine" rationality and autonomy with "feminine" sensibility and prudence within the heroine. Edgeworth's text joins the works of previous late eighteenth-century women writers, including Elizabeth Inchbald, Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Robinson, who also employed the novel to explore issues of education and gender construction.

In a provocative study of Edgeworth's *Belinda*, Deborah Weiss contends that Belinda represents the "feminized female philosopher" who possesses masculine "intellectual traits."<sup>227</sup> Weiss' categorization of Belinda as the "true female philosopher",<sup>228</sup> in contrast with the false representation of the female philosopher in Harriet Freke, suggests Edgeworth's engagement with the radical writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays concerning the misconception of innate intellectual traits.<sup>229</sup> However, it is not entirely convincing that Belinda functions as a "true" female philosopher, defined by Weiss as one who successfully overcomes the conventional belief of innate sexual differences. Weiss' label of female philosopher is based on her argument that Belinda's character challenges the standard notion of natural distinctions between the sexes by embodying masculine characteristics of rationality, loyalty, honesty and exhibiting control through self-reflection and reason. Weiss asserts, Edgeworth "effectively dismantles the connections between concepts of femininity and

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<sup>227</sup> Weiss, Deborah. "The Extraordinary Ordinary Belinda: Maria Edgeworth's Female Philosopher." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 19.4 (2007): 441-61. Print. 449.

<sup>228</sup> Weiss 459.

<sup>229</sup> Weiss 444.

concepts of the mind, separating intellect and the moral virtues gained through the understanding from any association with sexual difference.”<sup>230</sup> Despite this compelling statement, Weiss, however, develops her argument by essentially claiming that Belinda’s character represents a gender reversal by embedding a masculine mind and behavior within a female body but devoid of typical feminine traits of sensibility, submissiveness, or obedience according to Weiss.<sup>231</sup> Justifying her classification of the heroine, Weiss explains, “Defined against a society that believed in the existence of sexual character [and] [. . .] that insisted on fundamental, natural differences between men and women, Belinda is in every significant way the superior of average men and the equal of extraordinary ones.”<sup>232</sup> Consequently, according to Weiss’ description, Belinda, as the female philosopher, presumably supersedes her own sex as well in matters of moral conduct, intelligence, and independent, rational thinking, yet Weiss fails to compare directly Belinda’s virtues with that of the other female characters, likely due to the issue that Belinda’s “masculine” characteristics do not permit a suitable comparison. Belinda’s position as a female philosopher refines the balance achieved by Mary Hays’ Emma Courtney, who represented equilibrium between rationality and sensibility within this specific type of character.

Significantly, the comparison between Belinda and Emma Courtney can also be extended to the figure of the “improperly educated” woman, a character who represents the amalgamation of the conventional gender differences of “masculine” rationality and

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<sup>230</sup> Weiss 449.

<sup>231</sup> Weiss 460.

<sup>232</sup> Weiss 459.



“feminine” sensibility. The “improperly educated” female possesses a great depth of knowledge due to extensive reading, portrays independence of thought, and articulates her views and supports them with erudition. Furthermore, this character type had progressed since the mid-eighteenth century as women novelists explored and experimented with variant versions of gender identity, including rational “miseducation.” Initially, the “improperly educated” woman was represented in unconventional or, at times, deviant secondary female characters. This character typically symbolized the ironical derision and exclusion of rationally-educated females, who were considered a threat to patriarchal hierarchy; moreover, she demonstrated the destructive effects of gendered education, which inhibited the female sex from gaining knowledge outside prescribed gender boundaries. The progression of the “improperly educated” woman took a dramatic turn in the novels of the early nineteenth century, in which the representation of the character changed in relation to the conservative political backlash against the radicalism of the 1790s.

The trajectory of the “improperly educated” woman gradually appears to shift from alternative female characters, identified as representations of the subversive potential of female rational learning, to overtly traditional heroines, who exercised reason in their domestic roles of wife and mother. Although conservative in an ostensible manner, the shifting “improperly educated” female character continues to signify the complex negotiation between gender construction and rational thinking. The ironical association of rational female education with feminine impropriety within late eighteenth-century novels subtly develops into rational prudence, in which the heroine

displays both rational thinking and domestic inclination in the early nineteenth century. Of course, the educational method and the level of intensity in which rational instruction is given remain points of concern within the debate of female education; moreover, as Belinda demonstrates, rational prudence does not necessarily afford women greater independence. Edgeworth engages this contemporaneous discourse in *Belinda* through the female protagonists, Belinda, who represents the emerging “ideal” woman of domesticity and rationality, and Lady Delacour, whose domestication does not eradicate her subversive attributes.

Belinda is arguably a far more multifaceted and significant character than previously displayed in scholarship, and I believe that it is important to consider the correlation between Belinda’s proper feminine conduct and her rational mind. Eve Tavor Bannet provides an insightful study of eighteenth-century women writers and categorizes Edgeworth in conjunction with Sarah Scott, Charlotte Lennox, Eliza Haywood, and Hannah More as Matriarchal writers who utilized exemplary heroines to prove that the female sex possessed the ability to “rationally govern themselves by moral, positive, or religious laws to which men were in principle equally subject.”<sup>233</sup> Matriarchs, furthermore, attributed the debate on female education in part to men’s desire to retain power over women and reasoned that “an intelligent, a principled, an educated woman would think for herself. She would answer back. She would not be as inclined to obey a husband or father or be as easily ruled.”<sup>234</sup> Moreover, in “keeping women foolish and ignorant”, men felt “justified [. . .] in neglecting, ignoring, or ill-

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<sup>233</sup> Bannet 35.

<sup>234</sup> Bannet 33.

treating them.”<sup>235</sup> Bannet concludes that Matriarchal heroines seek domestic superiority through rational education and claims that Belinda achieves domestic power over Lady Delacour and Clarence Hervey at the conclusion of the novel.<sup>236</sup> However, I contend that neither Belinda nor Lady Delacour should be regarded as completely domesticated and transformed due to Edgeworth’s hesitation to reproduce the traditional ideal woman. It is my argument that Edgeworth’s novel denotes an underlying shift in the definition of the ideal female figure. However, issues still exist in the reconciliation of a new female model within an established social hierarchy and ingrained gender perceptions. Despite the frequent assumptions made by critics concerning Belinda as a “figure of female perfection”,<sup>237</sup> I argue that certain components of Belinda’s education can be comprehended as potentially subversive. Belinda’s self-directed reading could certainly be identified as threatening to conventional female education and social customs due to the fact that Belinda exerts agency over the books that she studies; Lady Delacour’s reading material and habits also depicts the hazards of unsupervised reading.

In authenticating female rationality within her novel, Edgeworth broadens the purpose of the “Moral Tale”<sup>238</sup> to provide an exemplary heroine for emulation; she concurrently engages convention and advancement within the various characterizations of the female sex within the text. Bannet’s definition of Matriarchal heroines reveals the potential for rational women to challenge patriarchal dominance and exert authority in

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<sup>235</sup> Bannet 33.

<sup>236</sup> Bannet 88.

<sup>237</sup> Kelly, Gary. *English Fiction of the Romantic Period, 1789-1830*. London: Longman, 1989. Print. 80.

<sup>238</sup> Edgeworth 3.

the domestic sphere. Belinda and Lady Delacour respectively must negotiate between intellect, social custom, and sexual desire; consequently, both female characters represent the struggles of the “improperly educated” woman. Belinda’s developing sense of self and logical mindset is comparable to the characteristics of the “improperly educated” woman, yet Lady Delacour’s outspokenness, independence, and passionate nature also delineates traits of this female character type. On the one hand, Belinda and Lady Delacour appear to represent the opposing ends of female prudence and imprudence of the female gender spectrum; on the other hand, it is possible to identify the two female protagonists as inverted images of one another in regards to their external behavior and their internal thoughts. For instance, Belinda is visibly prudent and proper, yet inwardly she has brief moments when her feelings and views do not readily correspond with proper social and moral expectations. Lady Delacour, conversely, is outwardly coquettish and independent, but privately she upholds traditional values.

The novel’s female characters present an array of educational backgrounds, accompanied by different personalities and behaviors, some of which are challenged throughout the novel. The novel provides little information on the childhood educations of either Belinda or Lady Delacour as the narrative focus lies on the advancement of knowledge and moral improvement of the two adult characters. Similar to other eighteenth-century novels written by women, Edgeworth’s *Belinda* presents several versions of female education, which include self-education, unsupervised reading, isolated Rousseauvian teaching, learning through inquiry and practice, critical discussion, and fashionable accomplishments. If plotted on a continuum, most of the

female characters would occupy positions situated between extreme positions of innocence (occupied by Virginia St. Pierre) and radical feminism (represented by Harriet Freke). Lady Anne Percival, who combines both rationality and domestic happiness, as well as Belinda would be placed near the center of the continuum and the other significant female characters, Lady Delacour, Mrs. Luttridge, and Mrs. Stanhope would be arranged near the endpoint of female deviance. However, Belinda and Lady Delacour could be plotted at multiple points along the continuum since they both experience a reformation of sorts, affecting their views and conduct. These two transformations involve strengthening of Belinda's moral character and rational mind and the reformation of Lady Delacour's coquettish and non-domestic behavior. The movement of these characters on the continuum attests to the malleability of gender constructions and reflects the mixed character of the "improperly educated" woman.

Past critics have commented on Belinda's representation as the prudent, idealized domestic heroine, but few have evaluated the complexity of her character and the effects of her continuing education. In comparison to Belinda's character, Lady Delacour more closely resembles to that of a mixed female character who neither fully exhibits deviant nor proper characteristics but occupies a middling position between the ideal and fallen woman. Michèle Cohen states, "Maria Edgeworth [. . .] is believed to have advanced a notion of 'female education [. . .] in all essentials the same as men's.'" <sup>239</sup> While Edgeworth does not place much emphasis on the previous educations of the female

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<sup>239</sup> Cohen "A Little Learning" 328.

characters, she does draw attention to the female characters' developments in learning or lack thereof.

***“Masculine” Femininity: Female Rationality and Gender Construction***

At the beginning of the novel, Belinda is described as having been highly accomplished and “educated chiefly in the country; she had early been inspired with a taste for domestic pleasures; she was fond of reading, and disposed to conduct herself with prudence and integrity.”<sup>240</sup> Edgeworth does not provide details of Belinda’s country education, but Belinda’s inclination for literature and virtuous behavior illustrates that moral instruction and emphasis on reading ability were likely part of this ambiguous education. The character of the “improperly educated” woman is likewise defined by her reading abilities and the wide range of literature she reads. Cohen argues that a “feminine curriculum” did entail some of the same subjects as for the male sex, including history, geography, astronomy, and modern languages, but the most significant difference was to avoid depth of learning.<sup>241</sup> While it is difficult to estimate the specific curriculum that Belinda would have undergone, it is peculiar that no references are made or credit given to Belinda’s natural aptitude or intelligence as basis for her prudence and understanding. The reader must accept the tacit assumption that Belinda’s country education has sufficiently developed her mind. Edgeworth does emphasize the various types of education that Belinda, as a young woman, excels at throughout the novel.

For instance, Belinda’s primary schooling is hindered by her aunt’s, Mrs. Stanhope, promotion of coquetry and manipulation in order to establish herself in the

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<sup>240</sup> Edgeworth 7.

<sup>241</sup> Cohen ““A Little Learning”” 329.

world and ensnare a potential husband.<sup>242</sup> The reader gains insight of her aunt's "teaching" through Mrs. Stanhope's praise of her own efforts to promote Belinda as accomplished, fashionable, and congenial potential wife to a man of fortune.

Edgeworth's critique of the vacuousness of fashionable education corresponds to the ongoing criticism of the lack of substance within female education. In comparison with Mrs. Stanhope's wordly instruction, Belinda's prudent upbringing and country education is ironically considered to be "miseducation"; due to the constitution of fashionable society, Belinda does not "perceive the least use in the knowledge that she had acquired"<sup>243</sup> from her earlier educational background. In her second letter to her niece, Mrs. Stanhope warns against becoming a "prude; a character more suspected by men of the world, than even that of a coquette."<sup>244</sup> Edgeworth satirically portrays the artificiality of Mrs. Stanhope's teachings through her hyperbolic advice to her inexperienced niece. She admonishes Belinda's concern of Lady Delacour's unrefined conduct, declaring that it would be "utterly inexcusable, if, after the education she had received, they [Belinda's principles] could be hurt by any bad examples."<sup>245</sup> Ironically, Belinda learns more from the "bad" example of Lady Delacour than even from the direct instruction later given by the Percivals. Caroline Gonda argues, "Belinda's own education is bizarrely without agency, a matter of passive constructions [. . .] For a young lady making her entrance into the world, she has too little to learn, learns it too quickly and thereafter is too level-

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<sup>242</sup> Edgeworth 7.

<sup>243</sup> Edgeworth 10.

<sup>244</sup> Edgeworth 16.

<sup>245</sup> Edgeworth 16.

headed and prudent for most readers' tastes."<sup>246</sup> Gonda identifies the implicit passivity of Belinda's education based on the narrator's description of Belinda and her initial behavior at the beginning of the novel. However, it is important to recall that Belinda's childhood education would most likely have prepared her primarily for the domestic role of a country wife and mother and would not have instituted any female empowerment or agency. Mrs. Stanhope's teaching would have provided instruction in the art of pleasing through fashionable accomplishments and coquetry.

Accordingly, it is erroneous for modern critics to criticize Belinda's education since female submissiveness was an intrinsic factor in proper female education. Belinda's lack of agency under her aunt's tutelage seemingly reflects the same degree of conformity she would have displayed in relation to her country education. Belinda's association with her notorious match-maker aunt, her compliant attitude to both her aunt and Lady Delacour, and her ignorance of the world subjects her to ridicule and compromising situations, which reflect negatively on her reputation. Belinda's behavior after her arrival to Lady Delacour's home is one of unquestioning submissiveness and desire for amusement. The narrator reveals that Belinda's "mind had never been roused to much reflection; she had in general acted but as a puppet in the hands of others. To her aunt Stanhope she had hitherto paid unlimited, habitual, blind obedience; but she was more undesigning, and more free from affectation and coquetry, than could have been expected after the course of documenting," which she had undergone.<sup>247</sup> Contradictory

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<sup>246</sup> Gonda, Caroline. *Reading Daughters' Fictions, 1709-1834: Novels and Society from Manley to Edgeworth*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print. 211.

<sup>247</sup> Edgeworth 10.



to the typical result of a coquettish education, Belinda's character remains one of ambiguity as her moral identity remains unaffected. Furthermore, Belinda becomes more adamantly opposed to the social mores during the continuation of her stay with Lady Delacour, notably due to her chaperone's narration of her past.

Once Lady Delacour discloses her history, relating her treacherous past and recounting her foibles, to Belinda in chapters three and four, the young woman experiences an enlightenment as Lady Delacour's narrative impresses upon her mind: "Astonishment at her [Lady Delacour's] inconsistency—pity for her misfortunes—admiration of her talents—and contempt for her conduct."<sup>248</sup> This epiphanic moment rouses Belinda's understanding in such manner that "she saw things in a new light; and for the first time in her life she reasoned for herself upon what she saw and felt."<sup>249</sup> Belinda quickly perceives the errors in Lady Delacour's conduct, and she responds constructively by employing her reason to reflect upon the consequences of Lady Delacour's decisions and discerning the virtues of Lady Delacour's character in spite of past faults. Alan Richardson states, "*Belinda* [. . .] show[s] how the internally regulated female character develops through testing itself, with the right guidance, against the snares of the marriage market and the fashionable world."<sup>250</sup> Belinda's self-regulated mind, which is highly praised as the novel progresses, falters at the beginning of the novel under the pressures of Lady Delacour's raillery.

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<sup>248</sup> Edgeworth 69.

<sup>249</sup> Edgeworth 69.

<sup>250</sup> Richardson 190.

Belinda is resolved against attending court after being witness to Clarence Hervey's diatribe against her as a "composition of art and affectation"<sup>251</sup>; she tells Lady Delacour of "her love of independence [. . .] and the necessity of economy to preserve that independence."<sup>252</sup> Belinda's self-regulation unequivocally corresponds to her moral and social propriety; however, it also applies to her self-directed reading and critical reflection. Cohen observes, "Far from being haphazard, roaming wildly without any plan or purpose, it [self-education] was highly regulated, following a strict and often self-imposed discipline [. . .] Systematic and disciplined habits of domestic study were an integral part of the educational programme of aristocratic girls."<sup>253</sup> Of course, Belinda herself is not a member of aristocracy, yet she has been assimilated in aristocratic culture and would have enjoyed the leisure time of the aristocracy. Edgeworth does not provide a continuous narration of Belinda's study, rather titles of texts are intermittently acknowledged throughout; it is reasonable to assume that Belinda would possess the self-discipline and consistency necessary for effective self-education.

There has been much critical debate concerning the nature of Belinda's character as a domestic proper heroine who is unable to express her erotic desire. Modern scholarship has acknowledged Belinda's representation of the values of proper domesticity and to Edgeworth's theoretical viewpoint of the importance of cultivated female understanding. Kathryn Sutherland observes that during late eighteenth century, the true value of women resided in "female embodiments as wife, mother, domestic

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<sup>251</sup> Edgeworth 26.

<sup>252</sup> Edgeworth 71.

<sup>253</sup> Cohen, Michèle. "Gender and 'Method' in Eighteenth-Century English Education." *History of Education* 33.5(2004): 585-95. Print. 589.

economist, and educator [to children]. Its recognition depend[ed] on the prescriptive force of a set of mental and emotional qualities culturally defined as ‘feminine’: sympathy, decorous accomplishment, [and] chastity.”<sup>254</sup> Belinda’s increasing prudence and growing consciousness of social custom prepares her for her “true” feminine roles; however, Belinda retains her current role as an autonomous young woman, dependent upon her own mind. Scholars generally consider the heroine to be “an idealized rational and thoughtfully educated young woman”<sup>255</sup>; however, if this description is further analyzed, it is unclear whether the heroine’s “thoughtful” education is derived from her country learning, her own self-directed reading, her study of Mr. Percival’s suggested texts, her observation and absorption of the lessons given by Lady Delacour’s history and behavior, or her adherence to the Percivals’ advice.

Although cast as an “ideal” character, Belinda is not ideally educated as she is exposed to a wide breadth of teaching methods, subjects of study, and life experiences. Belinda emerges from this educational mosaic resolute to act with prudence in all situations and resolved to rely on her own rational thinking; nonetheless, eighteenth-century society would have noted the dangers of this varied instruction due to her vulnerable mental state as a female. Belinda’s consequent behavior makes a major impact in the perception of her learning and this becomes a point of divergence between the “miseducation” of the “improperly educated” female in eighteenth-century novels and Belinda’s idealization of female rationality. The “improperly educated” female

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<sup>254</sup> Sutherland 25.

<sup>255</sup> Grathwol, Kathleen B. “Maria Edgeworth and the ‘True Use of Books’ for Eighteenth-Century Girls.” *New Essays on Maria Edgeworth*. Ed. Julie Nash. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006. 73-91. Print. 85.

character's erudition is typically considered inappropriate, but the depth of Belinda's knowledge does not draw criticism from those around her. In *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), Edgeworth, who employs a male narrator, stresses that females "need guidance in their choice of texts in order to improve their minds", maintaining that "women need to be diverted from 'works of the imagination' that convey only 'false ideas of life and of the human heart.'"<sup>256</sup> Belinda, however, does not require male supervision in her selection of reading material as her propensity for edifying texts prevails over the temptation of less substantive novels. Her enthusiasm for solitary reading and her frequency to spend private time within Lady Delacour's library is met with no censure even though Belinda relies solely on her own discretion.

Prominently placed in the middling chapters of "Rights of Woman" and "A Declaration," Belinda's departure from Lady Delacour's home creates an opportunity for the heroine to be instructed by the Percivals who not only recommend suitable texts for her perusal but advocate exclusive dependence upon rational esteem. Belinda's antecedent learning experiences through her country education and her autodidactic reading provide the basis for her reflection and deepen her understanding of the world surrounding her. Therefore, while the Percivals later impress upon Belinda the value of a regulated mind and rational thought, Belinda had previously begun to act by her own volition and to inform her decisions with logic and a growing understanding of social custom. One important distinction of Belinda's education, which is not shared by any of the other female characters, is the matter of her directing her own studies and readings.

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<sup>256</sup> Morrison, Lucy. "Conduct (Un)Becoming to Ladies of Literature: How-to Guides for Romantic Women Writers." *Studies in Philology* 99.2 (2002): 202-28. Print. 216.

Jacqueline Pearson states, “As a result of its potential to figure transgressive female desire, reading, even of legitimate books, often seems to generate danger.”<sup>257</sup> In chapter five, “Birthday Dresses,” Lady Delacour and Clarence Hervey discover Belinda alone in Lady Delacour’s library and perusing *Meditations on the Tombs*, written by James Hervey, an “essayist and prominent Methodist.”<sup>258</sup> It is important to recall that when Lady Delacour later immerses herself in Methodist religious tracts, the texts are blamed for heightening her sensibility and causing unsound thinking.

However, Belinda’s unsupervised examination of a text by a well-known Methodist is met with no narrative judgment. Lady Delacour, surveying her guest’s reading material, declares, “Here she is—what doing I know not—studying Hervey’s *Meditations on the Tombs* I should guess, by the sanctification of her looks.”<sup>259</sup> Lady Delacour immediately shifts the conversation to more “sublunary considerations [. . .] of much more consequence, upon hoops”<sup>260</sup> and nothing more is remarked upon Belinda’s solitary reading. It is interesting to note the absence of any form of censure for Belinda’s selection, especially in consideration of the criticism of Lady Delacour’s study of Methodist texts later in the novel. Even Belinda’s solitary and silent reading, during her stay at the Percivals, of sanctioned texts concerning morality and ethics from Adam

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<sup>257</sup> Pearson, Jacqueline. *Women’s Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print. 108.

<sup>258</sup> Kirkpatrick 490.

<sup>259</sup> Edgeworth 74.

<sup>260</sup> Edgeworth 74.

Smith, John Moore, Jean de La Bruyère, and Anna Lætitia Barbauld<sup>261</sup> would nevertheless have been perceived as potentially exposing a susceptible female mind to innovative notions and inspiring her to deviate from prescribed roles and duties. It is apparent that Edgeworth makes a conscious effort to treat Belinda's education in equitable terms and emphasize the positive effects of Belinda's reading and study in spite of the prevailing belief that two requisite parts of female education was proper supervision and a restricted curriculum. Rather than dutifully follow the conservative paradigm, Edgeworth revises the representation of rational female education as "miseducation" by grounding it in the domestic sphere.

Due to the increasing conservative social climate, female autodidactic learning and self-directed reading were criticized as unacceptable practices for females due to their "natural inferiority" and weakened mental state. A self-educated female posed a likely threat to conventional gender roles and social custom. Belinda's self-education is manifested through her reading selections, acute observations of her environment, and reflection on social propriety and custom. Grathwol argues, "We see Edgeworth again in her fiction challenging and rewriting overly simplistic formulas for female behavior and offering instead a new vision of the importance of meaningful female education and the possibility of female autonomy."<sup>262</sup> Although Grathwol's statement is made within the larger argument of the symbolic figure of Lady Delacour's deviant character, I believe that this claim can be applied to Belinda as well. Accordingly, one of the commonalities

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<sup>261</sup> I am referring to Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), John Moore's *Travels* (1793), Jean de La Bruyère's *The Characters, or the Manners of the Age* (1699), and Anna Lætitia Barbauld's "Against Inconsistency in Our Expectations" (1773).

<sup>262</sup> Grathwol 87.

between Belinda, Lady Delacour, and the “improperly educated” female is the characters’ representations of shifting definitions of gender constitution. In further comparison with the “improperly educated” female character, the diversity of Belinda’s education speaks to Edgeworth’s vision of improving female education through the extension of curriculum and teaching methods. The expansion of the heroine’s schooling was purportedly to benefit women in their proper, feminine roles of wife and mother; however, this purpose is not fully realized as the novel ends before Belinda assumes her gender position within the domestic sphere. The implicit suggestion that Belinda and Clarence will marry in the future reminds one of the indefinite future of Lady Matilda Elmwood and Henry Rushbrook in Inchbald’s *A Simple Story*, in which the reader is left to surmise the future of the younger generation. Nonetheless, the rational prudence of both Belinda and Lady Matilda are equally celebrated in their respective novels. The notable lack of censure of Belinda’s rational and autodidactic learning denotes the potential acceptance of rationally-minded and learned women, which the “improperly educated” female character represented, within society; however, the continuing dichotomous construction of logic and sensibility remains an issue within the novel.

The character of Belinda represents the continuing struggle for women authors to find a balance between “masculine” rationality and “feminine” sensibility. As some critics, Wein, Weiss, and Grathwol specifically have noted, Belinda portrays female rationality, necessary to mold rational citizens and excellent wives and mothers as described by Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Belinda’s dependence upon reason seems to align her with Wollstonecraft’s contention that women

of sensibility are unfailingly influenced by their emotions. Wollstonecraft insists, “The management of the temper, the first, and most important branch of education, requires a steady eye of reason; a plan of conduct equally distant from tyranny and indulgence: yet these are the extremes that people of sensibility alternately fall into; always shooting beyond the mark.”<sup>263</sup> However, the reverse effect, excessiveness in logic, is no less a concern for the female character. During the progress of the novel, Belinda’s rationality begins to dominate her thoughts and actions, but her struggle to suppress her emotions and to discipline her outward expression of her feelings, in order to fulfill the image of a rational, self-regulated individual, is a common complaint. Of course, Belinda’s inner conflict regarding her emotions is due in part to her observation of the imprudent emotional outbursts of Lady Delacour and to Edgeworth’s probable effort to differentiate her heroine from traditional understandings of the female sex as excessively sentimental.

The moments when Belinda does directly express her feelings are quickly followed by proper female decorum. When Lady Delacour informs Belinda of her use of Belinda’s name to persuade Clarence to purchase a pair of horses, Belinda “was inspired by anger with unwonted courage, and losing all fear of lady Delacour’s wit, she very seriously expostulated with her ladyship upon having thus used her name, without her consent or knowledge.”<sup>264</sup> Lady Delacour pleads for Belinda to realize Clarence’s feelings for her and to return his affection in kind. Belinda replies, “O, lady Delacour, why, why will you try your power over me, in this manner? [. . .] You know that I ought

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<sup>263</sup> Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Ed. Carol H. Poston. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988. Print. 68.

<sup>264</sup> Edgeworth 82.



not to be persuaded to do what I am conscious is wrong. [. . .] I am unpractised [*sic*] in the ways of the world. I was not educated by my aunt Stanhope—I have only been with her a few years—I wish I had never been with her in my life.”<sup>265</sup> Belinda instantly reasons that this circumstance “might be fatal to her reputation and her happiness”<sup>266</sup> and in order to remedy it, Belinda rationalizes that “it is better for me throw away fifty guineas, poor as I am, than to hazard the happiness of my life.”<sup>267</sup> Lady Delacour fortunately persuades the milliner to reduce the payment to ten guineas, but Belinda’s willingness to pay fifty guineas to rectify the situation reveals her determination to amend Hervey’s opinion of her and to begin to distinguish herself from her reputation as a pupil from Mrs. Stanhope’s schooling. Belinda, of course, has the same capacity for sensibility as Lady Delacour or any of the other female characters; however, Belinda’s prudence, united with self-awareness, causes Belinda to hesitate against acting impulsively based on her emotional response.

Maintaining her rational composure, Belinda briefly informs her aunt, Mrs. Stanhope, of the situation without revealing too much information on Lady Delacour’s role in creating this situation and receives this response: “You do not want sense, Belinda—you perfectly understand me—and consequently, your errors [*sic*] I must impute to the defect of your heart, and not of your judgment.”<sup>268</sup> Mrs. Stanhope blames Belinda’s affection for Lady Delacour as the cause of Belinda’s error rather than a mistake in judgment. Ironically, her aunt criticizes Belinda’s resolution as emotionally

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<sup>265</sup> Edgeworth 83.

<sup>266</sup> Edgeworth 82.

<sup>267</sup> Edgeworth 84.

<sup>268</sup> Edgeworth 85.

motivated and lacking in sense even though Belinda acted with prudence to settle the matter for all parties concerned by sacrificing the opportunity to attend the birthnight. The heroine subordinates her own desires and feelings in order to begin presenting herself as a proper woman. For the most part, Belinda continually refrains from displaying any emotional responses or acting upon sexual desires; unfortunately, the novel provides few moments when Belinda shows any extent of inner turmoil because of her increasing effectiveness to regulate her self-expression.

Belinda instead approaches her experiences from an objective stance not allowing herself to become subjectively involved. For instance, Belinda examines her feelings and actions concerning Clarence “with firm impartiality”, reasoning that her feelings of anxiety and hurt in relation to Clarence’s poor judgment of her were due to her wounded pride and trepidation of potential harm to her reputation.<sup>269</sup> Belinda justifies to herself that “it would have been inconsistent with female delicacy, to have been indifferent about the suspicions that necessarily arose from the circumstances in which she was placed.”<sup>270</sup> Belinda cannot validate her feelings because of her apprehension of excessive sensibility, as displayed by Lady Delacour, and her notion that reason should prevail over emotion. Kathryn J. Kirkpatrick writes, “*Belinda*, [. . .] is a novel about how a reasonable woman ought to behave.”<sup>271</sup> Unfortunately, Belinda as representative of a reasonable woman must avoid the pitfalls inherent with rigid reasoning, which becomes a type of stumbling block for the young heroine; due to her

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<sup>269</sup> Edgeworth 138.

<sup>270</sup> Edgeworth 139.

<sup>271</sup> Kirkpatrick x.

severe denial of her emotions, Belinda nearly ties herself to a man, Mr. Vincent, whom she merely considers an agreeable person rather than engaging her suppressed feelings for Clarence. The conflict between reason and sensibility manifests within the character of Belinda similar to the tension found in the “improperly educated” female character of Mary Hays’ *Emma Courtney*.

Belinda’s inability to reconcile reason and sensibility highlights the larger issue of balance facing women writers who advocated for improvement in female education. Late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century women writers faced the overwhelming task of negotiating the gender boundaries that separated the female sex from rational education. The dilemma of resolving the division between reason and emotion plagues the heroine Emma Courtney throughout Hays’ *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796). Rather than simply brush the issue aside, Hays approaches it directly through Emma, who explicitly argues against the notion that sensibility and rationality cannot coexist, and asserting that both reason and passion are un-gendered<sup>272</sup> and interrelated. Within late eighteenth-century novels, reason and sensibility represent the opposing ends of the gender continuum, signifying the constructions of masculinity and femininity respectively. Hays attempted to amend the imposed disparity through the creation of a rationally-minded, sentimental female character, who occupies the positions of heroine and deviant woman. Challenging convention in several ways in her novel, Hays did not waver in proposing improvements of the system of female education

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<sup>272</sup> Joy 227.

and attempting to equalize the extremities of gender portrayals, masculine logic, and feminine sensibility, through the use of the “improperly educated” woman.

Edgeworth’s *Belinda* likewise demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining the conventional gender designations of the two traits. Edgeworth refines Hays’ radical solution by moderating these qualities within the two female protagonists. Although there are occasional moments of oscillation between the end points of rationality and emotion when Belinda and Lady Delacour dually represent both characteristics, Edgeworth primarily constructs the two characters as distinct and respective embodiments of reason and passion. In response to radical writers, Edgeworth differentiates her text as upholding traditional values of domesticity and family hierarchy, but the novel’s defense that a woman should possess a cultivated understanding and properly regulated sensibility fails to fully resolve restrictive concepts of female gender. As Belinda’s character clearly shows, the internalization of external pressures induces females to strictly discipline both their rational mind and sensibility. According to Richardson, “the domestic heroine learns, by regulating her expectations and desires, to conform to traditional conduct-book manners and embody the passive virtues; her capacity to help reform an increasingly commercialized, decadent, and fragmented society increases in direct proportion with her ability to restrain her own egotism.”<sup>273</sup> On the one hand, Belinda exerts her influence and verbalizes her concerns in her attempts to encourage the reformation of Lady Delacour, representative of fashionable society; on the other hand, however, Belinda continues to subordinate her

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<sup>273</sup> Richardson 189.

own desires to appease others' needs and expectations. Although Edgeworth tempers displays of emotion in favor of rational thinking in both Belinda and Lady Delacour, difficulties continue to persist in regards to a successful reconciliation within the female sex. If Belinda's relationship with Lady Delacour had been in fact mutually reciprocal, Belinda would have been amenable to Lady Delacour's advice on sentiment rather than simply fulfilling her reversed role as the voice of reason and model of exemplarity for her elder.

During her stay with the Percivals, Belinda continues to gain experience and knowledge; furthermore, her reading and study become more profound as she gains insight and instruction from Mr. and Lady Anne Percival. Encouraged by the Percivals' open discussions of varied subjects and prompted by Harriet Freke's unexpected visit, Belinda employs her reasoning capabilities to form her own conclusions and make decisions affecting her life. Belinda affirms to Harriet, "I read that I may think for myself."<sup>274</sup> Throughout the novel, Belinda's rational pursuits strengthen her resolve to depend upon her own judgments for guidance. When Belinda refuses to accompany Harriet to the ball at Harrowgate, Harriet threatens her by saying that the consequence of her refusal will make her Belinda's sworn enemy, yet Belinda remains steadfast and does not succumb to Harriet's threats. Provoked by this conversation, Belinda reflects on her own actions in reaction to Harriet and reasons that "they [her actions] were right and necessary [. . .] she established in her own understanding the exact boundaries between

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<sup>274</sup> Edgeworth 227.

right and wrong.”<sup>275</sup> Belinda’s developing character is strengthened by her contemplation on morality and her expanded reading on philosophy and ethics. Reflective of the gradual progression of her education throughout the narrative, Belinda’s experiences and reading cultivate her understanding and her reasoning steadily refines her “taste for wit.”<sup>276</sup>

***The Paradox of Lady Delacour: The Properness of Impropriety***

The integrated dichotomy of Belinda’s prudence and Lady Delacour’s frivolity appears to be a superficial attempt to draw a contrast between the two female protagonists, but Edgeworth complicates this distinction by further inverting anticipated characteristics of each protagonist. In her effort to heed Lady Delacour’s life lessons, Belinda desires to construct a new image of prudence, modesty, and generosity in direct opposition to Lady Delacour’s public persona; however, Belinda’s deliberate effort to differentiate herself from Lady Delacour ironically reflects Lady Delacour’s personal self that she hides from public view. Montwieler argues that Lady Delacour “has internalized society’s morality”,<sup>277</sup> and she is overcome with regret of her past dissipation and poor decision making; she confesses to Belinda, “If I had served myself, with half the zeal that I have served the world, I should not now be thus forsaken! I have sacrificed reputation, happiness—every thing, to the love of frolic [ . . . ] If I were to live my life over again, what a different life it should be! What a different person *I would*

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<sup>275</sup> Edgeworth 232.

<sup>276</sup> Edgeworth 232.

<sup>277</sup> Montwieler 360.

*be!*”<sup>278</sup> Clearly, Lady Delacour’s ambition and spiritedness are not objectionable but the focus of her mental and physical energies becomes the matter of controversy. However, Lady Delacour’s realization of her improper behavior does not prevent further frivolous conduct on her part, as she admits that “it is still some occupation to me, to act my part in public—and bustle, noise, nonsense, if they do not amuse, or interest me, yet they stifle reflection” and mask the pain of her impulsive past decisions.<sup>279</sup> Lady Delacour is well aware of the impact that others, Harriet Freke in particular, have made on her life through coercion and compelling rhetoric but takes responsibility of her youthful indiscretions.

Despite the perceived impropriety, Lady Delacour exerts her agency in her ongoing performance of a woman of fashion. It is apparent that Lady Delacour does not comply with either category of the ideal or fallen woman, but her character encompasses an intermediate place between the contrasting figures. Grathwol describes this intermediary area as the “third figure—the ultimately good woman who has become subject to vicious rumors and ruined by the establishment of a public reputation for scandal.”<sup>280</sup> Lady Delacour as the “third figure” corresponds to the middling position of the “improperly educated” female who is also misconstrued as deviating from her gender role due to her “unfeminine” qualities of verbal assertiveness, overt sexuality, and intelligence. Reflective of the “improperly educated” female character, Lady Delacour exercises agency in her negotiation of gender constructions. She represents the

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<sup>278</sup> Edgeworth 30.

<sup>279</sup> Edgeworth 65.

<sup>280</sup> Grathwol 87.

comprehensiveness that Belinda ultimately fails to develop due to her concealment of her emotions: the concurrence of reason and passion. Ironically, she receives equal criticism for her “feminine” acuteness of feeling as she does for her “masculine” wit and unrestrained tongue.

Although Lady Delacour is primarily portrayed as a dissolute woman driven by her excessive sensibility, Lady Delacour does act with reason, and she counsels Belinda to resist succumbing to idle talk and to remain steadfast in her principles. When Belinda’s feelings are hurt by Clarence’s harsh words and she desires to escape further scrutiny, Lady Delacour pragmatically urges Belinda to follow her example by assuming an air of indifference to prove that she is unmoved by Clarence’s and the other fashionable men’s denigration of her reputation. The narrator frequently comments on the objectionable influence of Lady Delacour on her young houseguest; however, Lady Delacour urges Belinda to learn from her experience and the account of her history, which result in the most compelling lessons that Belinda receives.

Lady Delacour openly confesses to Belinda of her contradictory personas, revealing her recognition of the performative aspect of gender roles and her conscious choice of the role that she plays in society. She emphatically states, “I am, and I see you think me, a strange, weak, inconsistent creature—I was intended for something better—but now it is too late—a coquet I have lived, and a coquet I shall die.”<sup>281</sup> Although mentally ravaged by the inner conflict of her conscience and physically inflected by her wounded breast, Lady Delacour assumes the task of presenting a version of herself that

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<sup>281</sup> Edgeworth 64.



licenses her outspoken nature and indulges her desire to remain a focal point in the social setting. Her self-description as an “inconsistent creature” is promptly undermined in the same sentence by her avowal to continue to live as the coquettish figure that she has excelled in portraying. Lady Delacour’s public demeanor, which Belinda comes to abhor, represents a type of self-defense tactic, similar to Belinda’s attempt to act rationally indifferent in the case of Clarence and his rumored lover to protect her vulnerable emotional state. Although critics are inclined to elaborate on the vast differences between the two characters, both female protagonists consciously construct a version of themselves in reaction to how others view them. The narrator clearly approves of Belinda’s increasing reliance on rational prudence while condemning Lady Delacour’s sentimental influences, but the fact remains that both characters experience difficulty in reconciling their gender roles with their independent minds.

The act of reading and studying plays an integral part in the novel to establish female intellect and define the rational pursuits of these female characters. On the one hand, Belinda’s reading has been established through citations of specific texts and her quotation of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, yet her learning is not explicitly assimilated into her speech or reasoning process. On the other hand, Lady Delacour, whose educational background is unknown, frequently engages a wide range of literary works in her discourse, which at times are used to complete her thoughts or to ensure a particular impression be made. The utility of her literary and cultural references ultimately enhance the persuasiveness of her raillery and even sincere advice. The narrator claims, “Her ladyship, where she wished to please or to govern, had fascinating

manners, and could alternately use the sarcastic powers of wit, and the fond tone of persuasion, to accomplish her purposes.”<sup>282</sup> Macfadyen asserts that “a rough tally of the rates of allusion and quotation by the characters and the narrator of *Belinda* reveals that Lady Delacour out-quotes them all, alluding to literary texts eight times more frequently. [. . .] Her deliberate proliferation of literary references through quotation, parody, and allusion is her most distinctive form of self-display.”<sup>283</sup> Yet, the narrator and other characters comment only on the impropriety of Lady Delacour’s reading and quoting of classical mythology, fashionable French plays and novels, and texts of Methodism. Dr. X— surmises that Lady Delacour “seems to be in a perpetual fever, either of mind or body.”<sup>284</sup> The partial cause of this agitation is assumed to be tied to her perusal of improper texts, which roused her fervor.

Lady Delacour’s presumed corporeal reaction to her reading material signifies the period’s prevalent belief that a “women’s literary pleasure was generally regarded as a form of illicit sexual excitement. This widespread view generated a trope of female reading that asserts that women’s reading is an act of the body, not the mind. Thus women’s responses to literature are frequently represented as forms of gluttony, intoxication, or sexual arousal.”<sup>285</sup> Edgeworth responds to this trope with the varied types of female reading, including domestic, romantic, moral, fashionable, and religious, to explore the influence and effect of contact with textual genres. *Belinda* validates the female sex’s practice of reading through Belinda and Lady Delacour whose faculties are

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<sup>282</sup> Edgeworth 70.

<sup>283</sup> Macfadyen 425-26.

<sup>284</sup> Edgeworth 115.

<sup>285</sup> Macfadyen 426.

improved rather than impaired by their gradual expansion of knowledge. Of course in Virginia's case, the romantic novels function to augment her quixotic worldview in her isolated state,<sup>286</sup> but the two female protagonists, who have experience living in the external world, show the constructive effects of expanding the mind and the imagination. Accordingly, Belinda's reading not only assists her to think for herself but also further persuades her to conduct herself with prudence and focus her thoughts on more reasonable subjects. In relation to Lady Delacour, her active engagement with literature establishes her capacity for rational mental pursuits and demonstrates her familiarity with a wide range of writing. When detailing her history, Lady Delacour speaks of her effort to maintain her composure by quoting a French author duke de Rochefoucault who "said truly, that 'many would be cowards if they dared.'"<sup>287</sup> Her various literary references embellish her speech and reveal her fluency with French authors, but these allusions also at times serve to substantiate her statements or observations. For instance, as she plans for her reading party, Lady Delacour selects Voltaire's *L'Ecossaise*, a French sentimental comedy, due to Belinda's opinion that the London setting will be well received by the guests; Lady Delacour then swiftly remarks, purportedly in regards to the play's character Freeport, as one "qui sçait donner, mais qui ne sçait pas vivre."<sup>288</sup> The translation of this phrase is one "who knows how to give but doesn't know how to live."<sup>289</sup> Indicative of Belinda's nature rather than descriptive of the play's character,

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<sup>286</sup> Virginia's romanticized idealism is quite similar to Arabella's own quixotic view in Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752).

<sup>287</sup> Edgeworth 55.

<sup>288</sup> Edgeworth 164.

<sup>289</sup> Kirkpatrick 493.

Lady Delacour astutely comments that the young woman facilitates other people's happiness but fails to find her own contentment.

Lady Delacour's character is criticized frequently as irrational and emotionally ruled, yet her strength of mind garners admiration from those around her. Conflicting descriptions of Lady Delacour appear throughout the narrative, presenting her as foolishly ambitious or naturally ingenious. Of course, Lady Delacour admittedly enjoys the attention of the affable young men and appreciates the envy of her fashionable female acquaintances; however, the reasons relating to the continuation of this behavior elicit sympathy from many of the characters but principally from Belinda, who discerns Lady Delacour's internal conflict. The narrator expresses disdain for Lady Delacour as "a woman who never listened to reason; or who listened to it only that she might parry it by wit."<sup>290</sup> The narrator's comment belies the fact that Lady Delacour is quite capable of employing her reasoning; the main point of contention is that she consciously chooses against rational prudence in favor of maintaining her coquettish attitude. She embodies an alternate representation of femininity that not only challenges patriarchal dominance but also destabilizes the identity of the proper woman as the conventional paradigm. Lady Delacour possesses both an "admirable understanding"<sup>291</sup> and feminine sensibility, to which she gives prerogative over rational thought.

Similar to the "improperly educated" woman, Lady Delacour employs her understanding and discernment in a manner that does not facilitate her domestic role. Dr. X— expresses pity that "a woman who is capable of so much magnanimity should have

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<sup>290</sup> Edgeworth 122.

<sup>291</sup> Edgeworth 124.

wasted her life on petty objects.”<sup>292</sup> Similar to the perils posed by the sharp wit of Miss Milner to traditional hierarchy in Inchbald’s *A Simple Story*, Lady Delacour’s sense, considered to be inappropriate by society, presents the potential for subversion. Neither Miss Milner nor Lady Delacour receives any form of rational education but both possess the natural aptitude for rational thinking; furthermore, both female characters experience a struggle to resolve the conflict between a logical mind and a passionate spirit. While Miss Milner dies a slow, painful death due to her transgressions, Lady Delacour, as scholars have noted, escapes her demise in favor of reform, but Edgeworth adroitly evades fully reforming the lively Lady Delacour. She eludes being cast as the typical fallen woman but does not avoid feeling immense guilt of her part in Colonel Lawless’ senseless death. Her destructive ten-year friendship with Harriet Freke, the ridiculous figure of a radical feminist, and Harriet’s potent influence on her provokes Lady Delacour to question her own reasoning capabilities and to submit to Harriet’s control.

The account of her imprudent past makes a vivid impression upon Belinda while also clarifying the reasons for Lady Delacour’s changing moods. She tells her young listener, “Mine [her temper] was once open, generous as your own. You see how the best dispositions may be depraved! What am I now? Fit only ‘to point a moral, or adorn a tale’. A mismatched, misplaced, miserable perverted being.”<sup>293</sup> When read in the context of the scene, this quote reflects Lady Delacour’s current disposition of despair and guilt for alleging that Belinda had intentions to supplant her as Lord Delacour’s wife.

However, even in Lady Delacour’s dejected state, she reaffirms the potential for the best

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<sup>292</sup> Edgeworth 136.

<sup>293</sup> Edgeworth 266.

of women to fall prey to fashionable society and raises the question of her purpose and position within society as well as in the novel itself. The veracity of Lady Delacour's last statement in the quote is indicative of both her adamant belief of her forlorn condition and her understanding of the mistreatment of one who does not conform to gender restrictions. Twila Yates Papay asserts that Lady Delacour's "greatest tragedy is that she has the perception to understand her situation even as she lack the fortitude to change it."<sup>294</sup> The issue is not that Lady Delacour does not possess the strength of mind to overcome her circumstance but that she cannot achieve this without the relinquishment of her individual agency. Kowaleski-Wallace astutely writes, "Lady Delacour's narrative records the process of internalizing a specific image of womanhood",<sup>295</sup> which is not in accordance with ideal femininity and the ideology of domesticity, and documents the resultant effects of social castigation.

The reader is frequently reminded of Lady Delacour's excessive show of sensibility thus overshadowing her individual virtues. After her reconciliation with Belinda, Lady Delacour continues to suffer from the pangs of the quack's misdiagnosis and treatment of her wounded breast, yet the narrator focuses on Belinda's shock at finding Methodist texts among Lady Delacour's reading material. The narrator reasons that Lady Delacour's "understanding, weakened perhaps by disease, and never accustomed to reason, was incapable of distinguishing between truth and error; and her temper, naturally enthusiastic, hurried her from one extreme to the other—from

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<sup>294</sup> Papay, Twila Yates. "Defining the Educative Process: Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*." *Eighteenth-Century Women and the Arts*. Ed. Frederick M. Keener and Susan E. Lorsch. New York: Greenwood P, 1988. 141-49. Print. 146.

<sup>295</sup> Kowaleski-Wallace 110.

thoughtless scepticism [*sic*] to visionary credulity.”<sup>296</sup> The narrator further argues that as a capricious and emotional woman, Lady Delacour is not governed by rational thought but “by pride, by sentiment, by whim, by enthusiasm, by passion—by any thing [*sic*] but reason.”<sup>297</sup> However, Lady Delacour presents herself as having “strength of mind” and believes that she “might have been an ornament to [her] sex”<sup>298</sup> if not for her past errors in judgment and foolish behavior. Furthermore, the narrator’s numerous remarks that Lady Delacour is frequently governed by emotions and therefore unreasonable should not be construed as wholly negative.

Lady Delacour employs her compassionate nature to enlighten Belinda of the equal importance of emotional awareness. Despite the repeated assertions that Lady Delacour has not and cannot exercise her own reason, her efforts to advise and to protect her daughter Helena and her friend Belinda from preventable missteps demonstrates both a logical thought process and affectionate concern. Though she does not benefit from the type of rational education that Belinda and Helena both receive from the Percivals, Lady Delacour exploits her understanding and her ability to reason to better the lives of those people she cherishes. Both Lady Delacour and Virginia St. Pierre are depicted as figures of sensibility and criticized for their particular reliance on their shifting emotions; however, as Clarence can personally attest, the two females represent differing forms of sensibility: compassionate sensitivity and romanticized notions of passion. Edgeworth rejected the “extreme, mindless feminine sensibility men asked of women” as

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<sup>296</sup> Edgeworth 270.

<sup>297</sup> Edgeworth 271.

<sup>298</sup> Edgeworth 298.

represented in Clarence's failed attempt to educate and develop Virginia for his own "sexual tastes."<sup>299</sup> Virginia's vacuous mind and blind adherence to sentimentality starkly contrast with Lady Delacour's natural intelligence and the emotional influences on her judgment. The character of Lady Delacour represents Edgeworth's most successful attempt in the novel to balance "masculine" rationality and "feminine" sensibility.

Ambiguity surrounds Lady Delacour's earlier declaration that she "was intended for something better"<sup>300</sup> since it is unclear if she refers to a life of domestic happiness with an intact family unit or to an unfettered existence as a woman of fortune. Nevertheless, she laments her current situation, largely due to her mistaken belief that she is dying of a cancerous breast, at several points in the novel; in a serious discussion with her daughter Helena, she tells her, "Had I used but half the talents I possess, as I hope you will use yours, I might have been an ornament to my sex, I might have been a lady Anne Percival," a woman of feminine propriety and ideal rational sense.<sup>301</sup> Yet, once Lady Delacour learns the truth of her wounded breast and experiences her domestic "reformation," there is no pretension that Lady Delacour will actively emulate the actions of the "pattern woman"<sup>302</sup> of Lady Anne. As earlier noted, Lady Delacour, who symbolizes the agency of the "improperly educated" woman, is not entirely altered by the reform process; she continues to be boldly outspoken, maintains her independence of

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<sup>299</sup> Barker-Benfield, G.J. *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992. Print. 391.

<sup>300</sup> Edgeworth 64.

<sup>301</sup> Edgeworth 298.

<sup>302</sup> Edgeworth 121.



mind despite her transformation, and is “never entirely contained.”<sup>303</sup> Lady Delacour reminds her family, she is “won” over by others’ kindness, but “not tamed!”<sup>304</sup> She explains, “A tame lady Delacour would be a sorry animal, not worth looking at. Were she even to become domesticated, she would fare the worse.”<sup>305</sup> Further elucidating her argument, she claims that a comprehensive transformation would expunge her authentic self; accordingly, Lady Delacour’s “reformation” rectifies the unconventional family arrangement and reconciles her relationship with her husband, but her tenacity of spirit remains intact. Unlike Belinda’s improvement, which inspired severe prudence, Lady Delacour’s reformation only tempers her behavior and does not result in excessiveness of moral virtues to compensate worldly temptation. Mr. Percival’s and Lady Anne’s assurances that Lady Delacour will “return to her natural character”<sup>306</sup> suggests that the issue is her dissipated lifestyle of self-indulgence rather than the impropriety of her wit and raillery. Edgeworth makes a fine distinction in censuring the improper influences of fashionable society but subtly conveying positive regard for Lady Delacour’s independent mind and spirit. Edgeworth illustrates a new type of reformation that does not replace a woman’s will with compliance and demonstrates that a rational woman can operate within the social structure.

### ***Conclusion***

In continuation of the efforts made by late eighteenth-century women writers, Edgeworth perseveres to represent the social and domestic benefits of female rationality

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<sup>303</sup> Kirkpatrick xviii.

<sup>304</sup> Edgeworth 314.

<sup>305</sup> Edgeworth 314.

<sup>306</sup> Edgeworth 105.

and the capability of the female sex to cultivate their understandings through meaningful reading and study. Edgeworth appropriates characteristics of the “improperly educated” female character to create two seemingly divergent female protagonists, who ostensibly represent the dichotomous construction of rationality and femininity; however, an underlying association between Belinda and Lady Delacour reveals that the two characters experience difficulty in reconciling their desires and understandings with their gender identity. Interestingly, neither female protagonist fully fulfills their ideal domestic role: Belinda does not assume the role of wife or mother within the novel and Lady Delacour does not fully reform to her position as a domestic subservient. The absence of this role fulfillment conveys a shift in the definition of ideal femininity and denotes the potential for female agency within gender ideology. Edgeworth effectively represents the ongoing complex negotiation between restrictive gender constructions and the intellectual capacity of the female sex and authenticates an alternate version of femininity.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, women writers endeavored to promote change in the system of female education. Undeterred by traditional custom, women writers renewed literary efforts, specifically in the novel, to display similarities between women of diverse social classes and educations, thus exposing the negative effects of the conventionally transitory and inferior female education that the majority of the female sex experienced. In relation to the emerging debate on education, the question of whether female education should be improved to include advanced subjects and elevated thinking also raised the issue of gender construction and social custom in regards to its impact on female conduct, learning, and roles. Inchbald, Hays, and Edgeworth contributed their voices to this ongoing discussion through the portrayal of various versions of female education, including the ironical representation of “improper” female education that enabled women to acquire rational and classical learning and to develop their own logical reasoning and critical thinking skills. The three works discussed in the dissertation serve as models to early nineteenth-century women novelists who partook in the movement to standardize curriculum and inform the female sex of their capabilities to be equal partners in their learning. The evolution of the “improperly educated” woman into a more prominent literary figure does not lessen the tenacity of this character to represent the potential for equilibrium between logic and sensibility, which have been conventional designations between male and female sex. Furthermore, nineteenth-century women writers continued to employ the “improperly

educated” woman to portray the need for reconciliation between conflicting social mores and female’s intellectual autonomy.

Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1804) correspondingly shows the difficulty facing females to resolve this conflict and further represents “the complex negotiation between one’s duty to one’s self and to one’s larger community—family and nation.”<sup>307</sup> Similar to Inchbald and Hays, Opie shares an association with Wollstonecraft and William Godwin and the Jacobin circle, yet she approaches revolutionary ideas regarding female autonomy and rationality in quite ambiguous terms. *Adeline Mowbray* likewise ambivalently represents female autonomy by censuring Wollstonecraft-like radical claims for female rights while concurrently advocating for its own particular version of female independence.<sup>308</sup> One function of *Adeline Mowbray*, similar to Miss Milner’s and Matilda’s purpose, is to complicate the rigid division of the female figure as reflected in conservative and radical political views, which regarded female sexuality as mutually exclusive from female virtue as well as a female’s mind as adept at only domestic obligations rather than comprehensive study. Comparable to Edgeworth’s efforts to unify the divergent characterizations within her heroine Belinda Portman, Opie resourcefully unites the disparate attributes of masculine rationality and feminine sentimentality within her female protagonist.

Adeline represents a flawed but virtuous heroine; she who embodies learning, domesticity, virtue, and naivety and who “wisely resolved to fulfil [*sic*], as usual, every

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<sup>307</sup> Wallace, Miriam L. Introduction. *Adeline Mowbray, or the Mother and the Daughter*. By Amelia Opie. Glen Allen: College Publishing, 2004. 1-38. Print. 2-3.

<sup>308</sup> Wallace 3.

feminine duty [. . .] was convinced that she, like her mother, had a right to be an author, a politician, and a philosopher.”<sup>309</sup> Adeline’s ambitious yet improper study of philosophy and theories of abstruse topics does not diminish her domestic excellence. The character of Adeline reflects Miss Milner’s and Lady Delacour’s spirited behavior and Matilda’s and Belinda’s quiet fortitude and learning, yet Adeline suffers adversity “because her principles are too refined for the crass and self-interested world in which she lives.”<sup>310</sup> Opie’s novel emphasizes the glaring double standards of the world that castigates a female’s independence of mind. While Inchbald’s Miss Milner and Matilda represent the extreme ends of the education continuum, Adeline conversely reflects a balanced position, bridging the extremities of fashionable and proper educations and symbolizing the evolved “improperly educated” woman who is both attentive to her domestic duties and assiduous to her studies. However, the “improperly educated” female character is not easily accepted into proper society, and the novel reveals the continued need for social change.

In light of the conservative social and political climate during the early 1800s, women novelists, such as Opie and Jane Austen, provided a subtle challenge to the social oppression of the female sex and demonstrated how rational female education acted as an integral part to the domestic sphere. In *Mansfield Park* (1814), Austen creates female characters, Maria and Julia Bertram, Mary Crawford, and Fanny and Susan Price, who are comparable in conduct and education to Inchbald’s Miss

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<sup>309</sup> Opie, Amelia Alderson. *Adeline Mowbray; or the Mother and the Daughter*. 1804. Ed. Miriam L. Wallace. Glen Allen: College Publishing, 2004. 272-625. Print. 296.

<sup>310</sup> Wallace 4.

Milner/Lady Elmwood and Matilda.<sup>311</sup> Even though Fanny is reminiscent of the seemingly insipid Matilda and Edgeworth's Belinda, Fanny's rational mind and extensive reading serves to strengthen her principled conduct and self-discipline and facilitates her proper behavior. The main distinguishing factor between Fanny and Mary, her rival for Edmund Bertram's affections, is the difference in education; thus, Mary's deficient fashionable education fails to enhance her natural understanding or strengthen her moral character. Similar to the models found in other women's novels, Austen provides complex portrayals of female characters in place of clichéd figures of the coquette and conduct-book ideal woman; moreover, she subtly implies that proper feminine conduct extended beyond conventional moral principles and a submissive attitude, and she substantiates the developing definition of proper femininity as comprising a symbiosis between intellectual thought and sensibility through her heroine Fanny. The formerly believed impropriety of female erudition is proven by Austen's heroine, as well as by Edgeworth's Belinda, to be an asset to the domestic sphere as argued by the likes of Jane West and Hannah More at the end of the eighteenth century.

The last decade of the eighteenth century became a period of "(re)education and reorientation of imitation and desire", and women novelists used the opportunity to present alternate representations of female behavior.<sup>312</sup> Through the use of the "improperly educated" female character, these progressive writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were able not only to show the negative effects of female

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<sup>311</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these comparisons, please refer to Paula Byrne's insightful study in "A Simple Story: From Inchbald to Austen." *Romanticism: The Journal of Romantic Culture and Criticism* 5.2 (1999): 161-171.

<sup>312</sup> Bannet 18.

oppression but also to acquaint their female readers with a deeper understanding of the importance of female education. Although Inchbald ultimately failed to conceive the character of the “improperly educated” woman, she effectively portrayed the inherent conflict between female conduct and gender-based education. Hays resourcefully reconciled the gender traits of reason and passion by employing the “improperly educated” woman, yet this character suffered from social censure and isolation due to her intellectual pursuits, sexualized behavior, and uninhibited voice. Edgeworth integrated her own educational theories within her text and provided a rationally educated and prudent heroine whose education and moral conduct acts to her advantage in both the domestic sphere and in larger society. The “improperly educated” female character progresses from an ironical representation of female intellectual abilities and autonomy in the late eighteenth century to an acceptable figure of domesticity and logical thought within the early decades of the nineteenth century. Consequently, this character made a significant impact in promoting improvement in the system of female education and revising the definition of proper feminine behavior within British society.

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